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'I AM QUITE SURE YOU HAVE NOTHING TO REPROACH  
YOURSELF WITH.'

[see page 158.]

# THE FIGHTING LINE

By

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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## CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE OASIS IN THE DESERT . . . . .	1
II. BROTHERS . . . . .	13
III. ANOTHER VOICE . . . . .	23
IV. THE CONTRAST . . . . .	32
V. 'THE FRIEND' . . . . .	43
VI. LIFE'S THE THING . . . . .	54
VII. THE LITTLE LAD . . . . .	63
VIII. MUMMERS ALL . . . . .	73
IX. A NEW SENSATION . . . . .	82
X. 'GOOD-BYE' . . . . .	91
XI. THE MOTOR DRIVE . . . . .	102
XII. A MORNING CALL . . . . .	112
XIII. A STRANGE CODE . . . . .	121
XIV. IS IT OVER? . . . . .	131
XV. THE NIGHT BEFORE . . . . .	140
XVI. UP WEST . . . . .	150
XVII. SYMPATHY . . . . .	162
XVIII. THE COMPELLING EYE . . . . .	171
XIX. THE BOND . . . . .	181
XX. SUNDAY EVENING . . . . .	192

# Contents

CHAP.		PAGE
XXI.	THE NEW POINT OF VIEW . . . . .	202
XXII.	COMRADES . . . . .	212
XXIII.	TETE-À-TÊTE . . . . .	222
XXIV.	THE APPEAL . . . . .	232
XXV.	ON THE TERRACE . . . . .	243
XXVI.	THE ULTIMATUM . . . . .	254
XXVII.	THE AWAKENING . . . . .	264
XXVIII.	COME TO HIMSELF . . . . .	274
XXIX.	BUT SHE KNEW . . . . .	286
XXX.	THE NIGHT BEFORE . . . . .	299
XXXI.	THE NEXT MORNING . . . . .	310
XXXII.	THE LAST SLEEP . . . . .	320
XXXIII.	LOVE THE LEVELLER . . . . .	330

AGE  
02  
  
12  
  
22  
  
32  
  
43  
  
54  
  
64  
  
74  
  
86  
  
99  
  
10  
  
20  
  
30

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

'I AM QUITE SURE YOU HAVE NOTHING TO REPROACH YOUR- SELF WITH' . . . . .	<i>Frontispiece</i>
	FACING PAGE
'WELL, WHAT'S YOUR OBJECTION TO TED? I'M WAITING TO HEAR IT' . . . . .	40
IN THE REGIONS BEHIND, SHE WAS WASHING UP TO THE TUNE OF 'HOLD THE FORT' . . . . .	94
'YOU FINE LYDIES THINK YER CAN DO AS YER LIKES WIV PORE FOLKS' . . . . .	130
'HAVE YOU BEEN SPEAKING IN THE PARK TO-DAY?' ASKED GERALD . . . . .	186
'DO YOU THINK I AM GOING TO SUBMIT TAMELY TO THIS SCANDALOUS TREATMENT?' . . . . .	258
IN THE LONG, DEEP SILENCE HE FELL UPON HIS KNEES . . . . .	284
'THERE, T'HERE, LITTLE WOMAN, NEVER MIND. YOUR MOTHER DOESN'T MEAN HALF SHE SAYS' . . . . .	324



# THE FIGHTING LINE

## CHAPTER I

### THE OASIS IN THE DESERT

Two men were sitting together on a wooden bench standing on a narrow green plateau overlooking the Thames, far down the river, opposite the Greenwich shore. It could hardly be called a garden, though it was a clear, open space. In a happier, cleaner atmosphere it might have been a garden. Once in the long-ago time, perhaps, a blaze of colour and glory might have made the bank a thing of beauty, but flowers have ceased to flourish in the Isle of Dogs. Hopeful souls, new to the place, still drop the seed and plant the roots, not knowing what disappointment awaits them. The vapours from a thousand belching chimneys are in league against them, from the river itself arise nameless odours that have poison in their breath. But at that moment it was all beautiful; a summer evening, hazy and soft, the setting sun veiled in a tender mist lying

## The Fighting Line

tenderly on the Greenwich shore, converted all its unsightliness into a beauty indescribable.

The little house was very old ; those interested in the ancient landmarks proclaimed it a part of the Elizabethan era that had seen the zenith of Greenwich splendour. Time upon time it had been condemned by the authorities as unsanitary and unsafe, but it had remained, chiefly, perhaps, because it was enclosed within the boundaries of the great works which occupied a quarter of a mile of the river frontage. It was used as a residence for one of the employees, to wit, the ground-manager, the only one who was absolutely content with his habitation, and who begged that it might be spared. It stood face to the river, a low house, with latticed casement windows, the walls covered with dingy creepers. They flourished luxuriously enough, and served to hide the ugliness of the smoke-bitten bricks.

The grass surrounding the house and banking it to the river was a curious colour, but it was quite soft and well kept. Merivale kept it himself, cutting it and rolling and sweeping it, watering it whenever he had a little leisure. An old wooden seat of home manufacture, painted a dull green, stood well forward on the lawn, perilously near, it might have been thought, to the river's brim, not a safe playing-ground for children. But there were no children in the house.

## The Oasis in the Desert

The expression on the faces of the two men indicated that they talked of serious matters; both had interesting faces; Merivale, the occupant of the house, a fine one. He was a man of thirty or more, and the strenuous life had left its mark upon him. It was not a happy face; in the eyes there lurked a furtive sadness.

The other was big and powerful, seeming to belong to the artisan type; a suit of blue serge, a flannel shirt, and a knotted red tie gave an impression of carelessness which was really studied. He had a strong, harsh face, yet redeemed when he smiled by an inexpressible sweetness.

This sweetness Merivale had chanced upon long ago, when they had worked together in the same yard, and had never lost grip of it since, though they were cast in different mould, Merivale belonging to the upper-middle class, and having all the instincts of a gentleman; coarse words and coarse life did not appeal to him, and his sensitiveness had created a certain little bit of atmosphere even in the Isle of Dogs. Yet he was no weakling; his quiet strength was revealed in the stern squareness of his jaw, the inscrutable depths of his clear eyes, a certain air of decision in his whole manner and movement. He was a born leader of men, the other only aimed at it, but fell short through lack of a certain balancing quality which made his utterances ineffectual.

## The Fighting Line

'I don't like the way they're shaping, George,' said Freeman, almost surlily. 'We built our hopes too high, with the result that they have come toppling to the ground.'

'Give them time, Charlie,' answered Merivale, it might have been thought lazily, though there was no indolence in his eyes. 'How can a clean sweep be made of everything in a couple of months? Nothing else, I take it, will satisfy you?'

Freeman laughed as he drew his pipe from his pocket.

'It's mighty pleasant down here, George, and at the present moment I don't care a bit what measures they pass or shelve. I tell Manny often this is the only oasis in the whole desert of London.'

Merivale's face became subdued with a rare tenderness.

'When will you bring the little chap to spend another Sunday?'

'When it's convenient to you. The last one stands out. He's made a picture of the river as he remembers it from this seat. It's wonderfully good, only for some unknown reason he introduced a Chinese junk, with coolies on board; said it was a deputation coming to thank the Government. Queer little chap, isn't he? Life interests him immensely. If it weren't for him, George, I'd give up.'

## The Oasis in the Desert

'Not you, you're going strong,' answered the other affectionately. 'Although I confess I do not myself see the ultimate goal.'

'I'd go stronger if it weren't for Manny. You see, we talk over everything, and it's queer the grip of things the rascal has. Your counsels are nothing to his. His patience is extraordinary. I suppose lying on one's back teaches it. I'm getting used to it a little, chiefly because he's so bright.'

'I wish you could get him out of Camberwell, Charlie. I'd ask you to bring him up here, only our air is one lower than Camberwell. When I see how the flowers wither in their bloom, I conclude that it is no place for children.'

'There's a good lot of mighty fine specimens about,' said Freeman thoughtfully. 'I may have to go up North in a week or two; if you would take him then, I should be really obliged. The girl at the house is kind, of course, but we have to remember she is not exclusively for our use and benefit.'

'He shall come and welcome, of course,' answered Merivale cordially. 'I'll speak to Polly this very night.'

'How is it I never see Polly when I come now?' Merivale's face slowly clouded over.

'I'm not very happy about my sister just at present, Charlie, I confess.'

'I guessed you weren't, and I know why. I

## The Fighting Line

met her last Sunday in Battersea Park, and again on Thursday afternoon on Wandsworth Common, with that Glazebrook chap. It isn't good enough, and you ought to stop it, George.'

Merivale shrugged his shoulders.

'I hate the fellow, he's a rank outsider. But what am I to do? Polly is twenty-five, and has the right to live her own life. But Glazebrook! Glazebrook! What fools women are!'

'He has looks, and that particular kind of brute force that appeals to some women. He'll knock her about, George, if she marries him, and she'll never go back on him.'

Merivale's lip curled.

'Marry him? God forbid, Charlie! I'd do almost anything to prevent it. I've spoken to her, but it's no good.'

'I could see that from her expression,' said Freeman. 'But if it's marriage, it'll be a frightful shipwreck, that's all.'

Freeman was not given to overstrong language. Merivale understood that he felt the matter rather keenly.

'Fact is, Charlie, Polly and I don't sail in the same boat. The one roof covers us, and that represents all the intimacy there is. She doesn't understand my point of view, nor I hers. Nothing can compensate for that. I don't know where to begin.'

## The Oasis in the Desert

'Can't think how you both came out of the same nest,' admitted Freeman frankly. 'But that isn't the point. Couldn't you get some woman to speak to her, and warn her—Mrs. Mac, for instance, or—or Miss Romaine?'

His eye, quietly fixed on Merivale's face, took note of its changing expression. He had discovered what he wished to know.

'Polly doesn't like Mrs. Mac, she's too plain-spoken for her, and she talks religion to her.'

'But it's a good sound religion,' put in Freeman. 'About the only one I know that'll wash in the long run.'

'Granted, but it does not appeal to Polly.'

'Miss Romaine, then?'

'I would rather not speak to Miss Romaine on the subject. Besides, she is leaving the Settlement and going back to her home. The time they allowed for her experiment expires, I believe, next week.'

'And has it satisfied her? She's glad to get away, I suppose? Only stopped out the time to justify herself, eh?'

Merivale looked away, and Freeman did not catch the expression in his eye.

'I think she likes the work, but she hasn't been here lately,' he replied.

'To return to Polly,' said Freeman. 'Supposing she elects to allow that boulder to shape her life,

## The Fighting Line

what'll become of you? You can't live in this forsaken spot yourself and paddle your own canoe.'

'I do paddle it pretty much, as far as companionship is concerned,' answered Merivale. 'I can get a woman to come and clean up the place. It'll only help to develop the unsocial side of me—my strongest point already, as you are fond of telling me.'

'Bad for you, thoroughly bad,' said Freeman shortly.

'It's how you live yourself.'

'Ah, but I have Manny. He'd make and keep anything human.'

'A good wife would help both you and him,' said Merivale suggestively.

Freeman shook his head.

'That's the last event likely to happen. Let's revert to the delinquencies of the Government, George. They're vastly less disquieting than personal talk. Seems to me that the more one keeps one's personalities in the background the better. The impersonal never hurts.'

He spoke with some bitterness, but Merivale was called away by the faint far-off tinkle of a bell. 'Somebody at the house door,' he said. 'I'll go round and see.'

He walked round by the gable of the house to the front door facing the street, from which it was

## The Oasis in the Desert

only shut off by a rickety oak fence, and an inner hedge of scraggy brier which had survived the atmospheric ravages, though it had been vulnerable in parts. Ragged was the word to apply; yet it was sweet-brier of the old fashion, and after rain the savour was a joyous thing. Freeman rose, too, conscious of a sense of restlessness, and presently he could see the house door, where a woman stood, Merivale before her, with his hat in his hand.

She had a tall, slight figure, which the long, plain garb of the sisterhood seemed to accentuate. The face under the neat, close-fitting bonnet, with its sweeping grey veil, was one of extraordinary sweetness. Its colouring also was exquisite—a combination of the lily and the rose seldom seen in the Isle of Dogs.

Freeman could not see the face of his friend from where he stood, but his attitude was suggestive, it was one of adoration, as if he paid a tribute to that which he held in reverence. Freeman's jaw hardened as he turned away. Presently, however, the sound of voices and footsteps drew nearer, and they came towards him together.

'How do you do, Mr. Freeman, and how is the little boy?' she asked, with her fine, frank, sweet smile, which had made many little oases in the desert of the Isle of Dogs, and a very disquieting one in that particular spot. 'I came in to see

## The Fighting Line

Polly, but when I heard you were here I thought I must ask for Manny.'

'Manny is quite well, Miss Romaine, and he has not forgotten you,' replied Freeman, as he took off his cap. 'I hope you are quite well?'

His manner was a little awkward, hers was one of perfect ease and repose. She was a quite beautiful woman, tall and straight, with a clear, open face, regular features, and great sweetness of expression, and ladyhood was stamped upon her from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot. She carried her small head high, and every movement of her figure was a study in grace. The cloak, partly thrown back, as she for a moment sat down on the end of the painted seat, revealed the neat mould of her waist-line; she was well-bred and wholly charming, also she was perfectly at ease there with these two men, though she came from a different world.

'I have just been telling Mr. Merivale that it will soon be good-bye,' she said, and her face took on a pensive look. 'It is decreed that I am to leave the Barking Road indefinitely, perhaps even I shall not be allowed to come back on a little visit.'

'The loss to the Barking Road will never be made up,' said Freeman quite sincerely.

'They are good enough to say I shall be missed,' she answered quietly. 'And if they miss me half

## The Oasis in the Desert

as much as I shall miss them, well, their heartache will be genuine enough.'

'Where, and why are you going?' asked Freeman. Merivale himself was curiously silent, and the expression on his face was enlightening to his friend.

'My mother is in poor health. We go as a family next month to Sur le Baye in Bayonne, and do not expect to return until the end of summer, by which time,' she added, a trifle painfully, 'my place I suppose will be filled up.'

'There are places that are never filled,' said Merivale involuntarily.

'Do you think so? It is comforting, but doubtful. What does Mr. Freeman say?' she asked, with a slight arching of her brows.

'Merivale is right,' answered Freeman. 'It's a poor enough world, but it would be a worse one if there was no distinction of that kind. The Barking Road will be more sordid than ever after Miss Romaine leaves it.'

She smiled softly, and her eyes, catching the yellow light on the Greenwich shore, had a curious deep look in them which Merivale would have liked to have interpreted.

'I mustn't stay as Polly isn't in. I do want to see her, though,' she said, rising to her feet. 'Will she be in on Sunday afternoon if I come round?'

## The Fighting Line

'I will see that she is,' answered Merivale quickly.

'And will Manny be here, and his father, too?' she continued. 'It will be my last Sunday afternoon in the dear Isle of Dogs, and I should like to spend it here if I may.'

'We shall look forward to it for the rest of the week,' said Merivale.

'Thank you, and good-bye, Mr. Freeman. Tell Manny, with my love, that I'll tell him the end of the story on Sunday.'

She nodded with a smile, and Merivale, still with cap in hand, accompanied her back to the gate.

Freeman watched them go with a curious expression on his face.

## CHAPTER II

### BROTHERS

**F**REEMAN was scarcely surprised that Merivale did not hasten back. It was quite ten minutes before he rejoined him at the painted seat, and then he came through the house, where he had been moving about for several minutes. He sat down on the seat again, and seemed to draw him together with a little shiver.

'We have no real summer yet; there's always a nip in the night wind of May.'

Freeman did not answer for a moment, then the words he spoke had no reference to the weather.

'So that's the woman,' was all he said.

'Yes,' answered Merivale heavily. 'That's the only woman.'

'Well, she's worthy of you; yes, she is, though I thought the woman had not yet been born good enough for you. Old man, I wish you luck.'

'Luck!' repeated Merivale a trifle painfully. 'What sort of luck?'

'The usual,' replied Freeman cheerily. 'Wedding-bells, old slippers, happy ever after.'

## The Fighting Line

Merivale smiled somewhat sardonically.

'You don't know who she is, I suppose?'

'I don't know where she belongs, but she's the right stuff herself. What an eye she has! No lie or shame or humbug could live in her presence.'

'That's right enough. She spoke about being missed in the Barking Road. It would have been better for some of us if she had never set foot in it. That's what happens with these fine ladies,' he added, with a sudden fierce resentment. 'They come down from their high places, among common folk, they bathe them in their sweetness, so to speak, take all they have to give, and go away. That's what has happened to us. She will be no worse; she'll keep on talking about the dear Isle of Dogs, telling her friends about it, much as we might speak to ours about the Isle de Diable. The comparison is about equal.'

'You're hard hit, old man,' said Freeman quietly. 'Tell me who she is.'

'She's the daughter of General Sir Hugo Romaine of Cromwell Road, and Ruthlin Court, Stafford. That's who she is, and I am the poor fellow, I am, that's all.'

Freeman was staggered. Agitator as he was, student of and foe to every social distinction, he knew full well all that the statement implied.

'What does she down here, disturbing the peace

## Brothers

of people that have no use for her or her kind ? ' he gruffly asked.

' I have told you. It's no new thing, Freeman, you yourself have often railed against it. She was smitten with the craze to learn how the East End differed from the West End. Of course, they were only too glad to get her at the Settlement. She has means, and a way with her nobody could resist. I don't say she hasn't been of use here. I thought she took us a mighty lot too seriously.'

' Then you won't speak—she'll never know——'

' I won't speak, and she'll never know.'

' And your life's finished in that direction at thirty-three—that's your age, isn't it ? '

' Thirty-three.'

' Then there's another added to the long list of wrongs that will never be righted in this world unless we set about it. This ought to scatter your last scruples, Merivale, and incline you to join hands with us.'

Merivale shook his head.

' I am only where I was before, and I don't see the remedy in Socialism. Don't let's go over the whole ground again. It's a weary discussion, and quite futile. Can you come on Sunday ? '

' Yes, up till half-past four ; then I have to support Wills and the German delegates in the park.'

' I see. Well, we'll look for you on Sunday.'

## The Fighting Line

'But why let her come? It's only rubbing it in. I'd be done with the whole matter when you think it's hopeless, that's my way.'

Merivale faintly smiled.

'It wouldn't make any difference; let her come.'

'Agar is speaking to-night at the Lambeth Baths. Let's go up, at least it will be better than this,' said Freeman, whose eager spirit was quickly affected by prevailing gloom. He wanted some active interest at the moment himself, and was certain it would be good for his friend.

Merivale looked but languidly interested. 'We'd hardly get there in time.'

'Oh yes, he doesn't come on till eight-thirty; it's hardly eight yet. Come on, George, it will do you good.'

Merivale rose and shook himself.

'Yes, I'll come; this thing isn't going to master me, Charlie. It's only one more leaf turned over in the book of life! What a queer jumble it is for some of us. It's always interesting, too, however painful the reading may be at times.'

Freeman nodded gravely. In Merivale's company he was no longer a clamant socialistic, but rather the quiet student of human nature and life. The influence of Merivale was undoubtedly the strongest in Freeman's life, and had been instrumental more than once in keeping him from more

## Brothers

extreme lines of conduct. Especially had this been the case within the last year, when the party from which Labour and Socialism expected great things had come into power. Merivale had leanings towards Socialism in a mild way, but his long experience of the working-man, the trials and difficulties of his own position as manager, in a place where five hundred men were employed, had brought him to see things in their true light, and he had proved beyond all dispute that a great cause is too often desecrated and made the cloak for individual selfishness and idleness. Freeman was still enthusiastic, but, though not agreed on many points, the two were good friends, nay, intimate ones. Merivale was the finer character of the two; he was better born for one thing, his father having been a curate in charge of an East End parish, so that he had been reared in one atmosphere all his days. He was fond of saying he ought to know the East End, its wrongs and its needs, since he had never left it. He had been well educated at the City of London School, but had declined to enter the Church, preferring the strenuous life of the artisan. When his enthusiasm had been young and fiery, he had decided to throw in his lot with his brother-toilers, so that he might better understand them, and help them as occasion arose.

But experience had cooled his blood, and an

## The Fighting Line

uncommon evenness and soundness of judgment enabled him to spot the real causes of much of the misery of the East End. He remained the friend of all who sought his help, and kept many a one in the right way, but he had never been an agitator, nor sought to be a leader of men; rather he had accepted the position of the looker-on, who sees most of the game. He was well known in the whole grim, grey area which lies along the river banks from Tower Bridge to Millwall, and only the few knew what quiet power was his, used as a lever to improve the condition of things without any clamour. He aimed at improving the man, and in individual cases had succeeded well. The great hive of which he was the practical head—viz. Larmer's chemical works—was generally free from that ferment which the soul of the agitator loves. They were considered renegade in the more extreme quarters, but even those who most disapproved of Merivale's lukewarmness in the cause of Labour—spelled with a large capital—were forced to respect the man. On more than one occasion he had asserted himself, and had spoken with an effect which staggered them, and they quickly arrived at the conclusion that it would be to their best interest to leave Merivale alone, and keep him quiet.

Freeman had passed through many phases. A private wrong, which need not be touched upon

## Brothers

here, had soured him in his youth and turned his hand against every man. He had a certain superficial cleverness, and an exceedingly persuasive tongue, which had quickly singled him out for the notice of the organisers of the Socialist party. He was now one of the leaders, whose business was to agitate in season and out of season, to demonstrate and talk and teach the multitude the way in which they should go. The rôle suited him; and Merivale, who seldom went to hear him, regarded him with a mild amusement. At times the fiery words which would fall from his lips in Hyde Park or on Tower Hill, breathing out threats and slaughterings, were utterly alien to the real nature of the man, which was tender and loving like a little child's.

Merivale did not take him seriously; he often told him it would be infinitely better were he to leave the whole business and begin to live for himself. So far, however, Freeman had not been convinced of the hollowness of the gods he pursued. Merivale's influence was one of the best in his life; the first and most vivifying influence was that of his only child, a little boy, suffering from a spinal trouble. This child embodied at once the passion of Freeman's life and its explanation. But we shall learn more concerning its power as we go on.

They left the house in a few minutes, Merivale

## The Fighting Line

locking the door and putting the key in a crevice of the wall under the close green of the ivy—ivy which had been growing there nobody knew how long, perhaps even as far back as the Elizabethan days, which made the neighbourhood so rich in association.

‘Polly may come back before me. We have only one key between us,’ he explained, as they turned to go.

‘It’s a good idea. Has nobody ever discovered the hiding-place, as safe and unsuspected as a bird’s nest?’

‘I don’t think so, and there is very little to tempt anybody in our home, Charlie, as you know.’

‘Maybe, but one wouldn’t like the idea, eh?’ asked Freeman. ‘I love this little nest; it’s a landmark, one of the most precious bits we have.’

‘Tell me what you know about Glazebrook, Charlie,’ Merivale said, as they passed through the little wicket and the ragged hedge into the flint of the narrow street, flanked by the great wall of the Larmer works. The question indicated the furtive anxiety which consumed him.

‘He’s an outsider,’ replied Freeman curtly. ‘I know too much about him. He ought never to be allowed inside your gate, and he is not fit to speak to your sister.’

‘What can I do?’ asked Merivale, the shade

## Brothers

deepening on his face. 'She's twenty-five, and won't be ordered about like a girl. She has the right, every woman's right, to choose her own lot.'

'If she chooses Glazebrook, God help her!' muttered Freeman under his breath.

'I don't like the fellow, I admit, but he has qualities which seem to appeal to women,' said Merivale, thinking of Freeman's former words.

'He's had a lot of them through his hands, any way,' said Freeman in a savage undertone.

'Perhaps if he could be got away from his present companions—I happen to know who they are—something might be made of him,' said Merivale.

Freeman stood still at the street corner where it converged upon the busy main thoroughfare.

'George, you can't be contemplating it as a serious thing for your sister?'

'I may have no choice,' answered Merivale shortly.

'Has she been told the real sort of man he is?'

'Well, I've told her—yes, pretty plainly. But what is the use of speaking to a woman on that subject? She will always trust her own judgment, and choose her own road.'

'But something must be done further to try and prevent it. It would be shipwreck for her, believe me, George, absolute shipwreck without

## The Fighting Line

one redeeming feature,' said Freeman desperately. 'Couldn't you ask Miss Romaine to speak to her?' he repeated. 'Since I've seen her again I'm sure she's the one——'

Merivale's face flushed. 'I couldn't do that, Charlie. I have not the right, and besides, there is one's natural reticence——'

'Bother reticence, George! It doesn't do to be too mealy mouthed about big things, and this is a big thing. If everything else fails I'll tackle Glazebrook myself.'

'I've always heard, and observed too, that opposition fans the flame,' put in Merivale quietly.

The subject dropped, but was by no means banished from their thoughts.

## CHAPTER III

### ANOTHER VOICE

WHEN they reached the place of meeting at the Lambeth Baths they found it crowded. The chief speaker, Mr. Franklin Agar, was one of the most popular, if one of the best criticised ministers in the present Cabinet. His subject that evening was an interesting one, viewed from any standpoint—viz. 'The True Social Reform.'

Merivale viewed the dense mass of the audience with dismay. He did not like crowds, and never of his own free will went where they were.

'We'll never hear a word, Charlie. I think I'll go back,' he muttered, as they stood a moment at the door.

Freeman smiled. 'Come on, it'll be queer if we can't get a front seat. I generally do.' He walked in calmly, and they made way for him without protest. He was known to most of them, and they thought it possible he might be there in an official capacity, with instructions to take part in the proceedings.

Right down the side aisle they went until they

## The Fighting Line

reached the front row, where there were a few vacant chairs. Freeman promptly took one, motioning Merivale to another. At that moment the platform party began to come on from the wings, and Merivale was immediately interested. He was not an attender of political meetings, and frequently said that the outsider had the best chance of forming an unbiassed judgment. It was not lack of interest, since few men had a better grip of public questions, as Freeman had discovered through their many discussions. But he preferred the unbeaten track, held curious ideas, and sometimes said that if everything could be swept away, and a new *régime* organised, things might have a chance of improving. He knew the Mayor of Lambeth, who took the chair, and dismissed him at a glance. But the man who followed, Franklin Agar, interested him at once.

Agar was a tall man, looking about fifty-five ; he had a well-knit figure and a fine, strong face, clean-shaven and inclined to sternness, though redeemed by the mobility of the mouth. A twinkle in the clear, grey eye as he made a remark to his chairman indicated that happy turn of his disposition, characteristic of the really popular public man. Yet immediately afterwards his face in repose looked sad. Merivale observed the natural downward droop of the lips, and a curious, still, deep expression in his eyes as they wandered over

## Another Voice

the crowd. It was a yearning look, which long haunted Merivale. The day came when he learned its inward meaning.

A lady followed Agar, so like him that it was easy to assume a relationship. She was his widowed sister, Lady Tyrrwhit, who kept house for him. Immediately following her came a tall, military figure, at whom Merivale scarcely looked, simply because his eyes fell on the face of the woman from whom he had parted scarcely an hour ago, Janet Romaine. She came in behind the military gentleman and quietly took her seat. Merivale's face flushed in spite of himself, and he quickly averted his head.

'Miss Romaine, old chap,' said Freeman, with a nudge.

'Yes. What can she be doing here?'

'Came with her father, I could bet; yes, here's his name on the programme, General Sir Hugo Romaine.'

Merivale was spared the necessity of replying, for almost immediately the meeting began with the speech of the mayor, who introduced the speakers.

While he was speaking Merivale removed himself to another chair a little way farther up. Freeman wondered why he did so, since it took him farther away from Agar. He did not know, of course, that Merivale desired to put a tall palm between

## The Fighting Line

him and the face of Janet Romaine. She had already seen him, however, and Freeman also, and nodded with a bright smile.

Merivale studiously avoided her eyes.

The meeting went on. Soon Merivale forgot other distractions in his growing interest in the speech and personality of Franklin Agar. Both were out of the common. It was especially, however, the magnetism of his personality which Merivale felt.

Freeman was more critically inclined, and during the speech took copious notes, listening tensely, determined not to lose a word. It was a fine, luminous, eloquent deliverance, sketching with a broad, generous hand the picture of a new London, purged from every alloy of self, a stately edifice, a model of municipal and humanitarian perfection, which would be at once a joy to those who dwelt within her walls, and an object-lesson to all the nations of the world. It was the ideal and the exposition of a master-mind, the whole man glowed and thrilled with the passion of his soul, and he carried his audience wholly with him. But in the new palace life was not to be built upon the basis which Freeman and others like-minded with him desired. There was no exaltation of labour, as they understood it; of such exaltation indeed, he said, there had been too much.

Merivale was fascinated, and more than once

## Another Voice

felt conscious that Agar saw him and was speaking to him individually, as well as to the audience in the mass. When a speaker possesses that power he holds those who listen in the hollow of his hand. He spoke for over an hour, and when he sat down all other utterance seemed hollow and futile.

'We ought to go home now, Charlie, every man Jack of us,' whispered Merivale. 'The rest of the speaking will spoil the effect. If only organisers could recognise that, there would be less waste of time and energy.'

Freeman stared a little, and smiled drily.

'What a chap you are! The fun's only beginning. A good speech? Well, it's got the tricks of the trade; but we'll see it torn to rags presently by those who know more about the actual problems than any Cabinet Minister in the world.'

But he was wrong; the temper of the audience was fine. Agar had played upon it with consummate skill. The discontent against the Government, already seething in certain quarters, was for the moment allayed; some greatness in the man, the absolute sincerity of his mind and purpose, appealed to them.

For the moment great questions, sordid questions, seemed to be lifted into the upper air. The note of individual responsibility was struck, and the true manhood present burned to respond to it.

## The Fighting Line

Even when Freeman, generally a favourite, rose to his feet to put a few questions, he could do no more than stir the surface of a sea that had been moved to its depths. The meeting, after the usual votes of thanks, was broken up.

Merivale and his friend had difficulty in getting out, being so far forward, but he kept his eyes from the platform. He could see, however, that Miss Romaine was in eager, animated conversation with Agar as they began to move slowly from the platform, and understood that she was giving him a bit of her own experience of the appalling problem with which he had been dealing. He sighed, a trifle impatiently. What did either of them know, after all, of the actual depth of the misery of the East End, of its hopelessness? One required to be cradled in it, to get it in the very blood.

They went out by the side-door, and in the lane melted into the crowd. But in the main road Janet Romaine came up with them. She had parted from her friends, and was now a unit in the crowd also, going back to her self-sought niche in the Barking Road. Seeing her alone, Merivale took off his hat and approached her.

'Good-evening, Miss Romaine.'

'Oh! good evening again. Will you take me home? I suppose you are going there. Where is Mr. Freeman? I have a crow to pick with him.'

## Another Voice

'He is with some friends in the audience. He may go into committee or something,' replied Merivale, with a quiet smile. 'We need not mind him. I dare say he will understand.'

He took her arm and piloted her through the crowd. His blood flowed a little faster at his own presumption, which, however, she did not resent. Her colour was a little heightened, and she looked adorable.

'Well, tell me how you liked it?' she asked, when they had got out of the press of the crowd and had room to breathe.

'He is a fine speaker, of course, but one does not often find a Cabinet Minister so familiar with Utopia. Such flights of imagination are usually credited wholly to the other side.'

She laughed a little, low, merry laugh.

'He is a splendid man. I suppose you wondered to see me there to-night? I have not told you that Mr. Agar is my uncle.'

'No, you certainly did not,' answered Merivale. 'Was it quite fair? We have sometimes discussed him, and Freeman is not too particular.'

'Oh! that is part of the game,' she answered unconcernedly. 'Perhaps you need not tell him, even now. I assure you I have often told Uncle Franklin about our discussions; they interest him immensely. I wish you would ask him to tea on Sunday. It might be instructive and interesting

## The Fighting Line

for us all, especially if he and Mr. Freeman could come to close quarters.'

Merivale merely smiled, not taking her seriously.

'That was your father who came with you?'

'Yes. His politics are opposed to Uncle Franklin's, but they are very good friends. My mother hoped to have come too, but she is not strong. Her sister was Mrs. Agar.'

'Was? Then she is dead?'

'Oh yes, a good many years ago. He has had such a sad life. They were passionately attached—in fact, my mother says it was the ideal marriage, yet it did not last. It seems at times as if only the couples who are pulling different ways were permitted a long lease of life. One sees it even in the Barking Road. The woman who is knocked about is seldom freed in the natural way. One is full of perplexities, and all one's notions of justice get upset.'

'I wonder why they allow you down among us,' he said experimentally.

She shook her head, and her face fell.

'They don't allow it in the usual sense; they have suffered it, that is all. My six months will be up on Wednesday; father was reminding me of it to-night. One week from now I may be in the thick of the London season. It is awful to contemplate. I shall never, never like it now.'

## Another Voice

I shall not be able to bear it ; but there's one's duty to one's parents, is there not ? '

She turned to him, half-appealingly, as if hoping he would speak some decisive word. But he had none to speak. Even if he had been tempted, he would have stayed its utterance. It was passing sweet to be permitted to walk by the side of this woman, to protect her from the petty dangers of the streets, though she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. But he was glad in a dull, grey way that soon it would be over, that soon she would return to her own environment and sphere. It would have been better for some of them if she had never left it, that was all.

' Closer acquaintance with us has not disgusted you ? ' he said quietly.

' I think I must have been a foundling, really,' she answered, ' because my real heart is down East.'

He gave a start and half-turned his head away. She wondered at the gesture, and regarded him attentively, but his next word struck such a commonplace note that she, who possessed the sense of humour in a large degree, laughed outright.

' Shall we take an omnibus or a train ? ' was all he said.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE CONTRAST

THEY rode together on the top of the omnibus to the doors of the Settlement House where she lived.

‘ You will remember your promise to come to us next Sunday, as it is your last ? ’ he asked, with a hunger in his eyes of which she was quite conscious.

‘ Yes, ’ she answered quietly. ‘ You know I’ll come. ’

‘ Freeman will be there, and Manny. Manny fell in love with you the other Sunday, and now Freeman is deploring the fact that you had not met before. He thinks of all the opportunities Manny has been cheated out of. And he has none too many within his reach, poor little chap. ’

‘ Oh, but Cromwell Road is not so very far from Camberwell, and the treadmill of the season leaves the mornings free, ’ she said quickly. ‘ I assure you, Manny and I are only at the beginning of things. How wise God is ! It is Manny who keeps

## The Contrast

his father human. Had he been a healthy boy, he could not have had half the power.'

Merivale agreed, and wondered at her insight; also a little perhaps at her choice of expression. It was not how he would have spoken, or even thought; he had lost grip of belief, the little grip he had. Life had embittered and fostered every kind of doubt. Endurance was now the watchword of his life. But endurance is a very grim watchword, by whose inspiration no great deeds can be wrought. Merivale's life was slipping by, carrying on its slow breast many great opportunities unused. The clear eyes of the woman who had begun of late to understand him, read the protest he did not utter.

'You think God has nothing to do with it—wait, He will lay hold of you yet, my friend. What time on Sunday?'

'When you like—the whole day would not be too long,' he said impulsively.

'Uncle Agar has carried you away,' she said playfully. 'Good-night. I will look in at the dear Isle of Dogs about four o'clock.'

She nodded, smiling, and so left him, not offering her hand. Afterwards he remembered the omission and wondered at it, but the memory of the smile remained.

He walked back through the stupendous throng of the streets to his little home, not hastening,

## The Fighting Line

though it was ten o'clock. Nobody seemed to keep early hours in the Barking Road, and housewives will sally forth to do their marketing at an hour when country folk are all in bed, fast asleep. Merivale viewed the seething multitude with that aloofness tinged with tenderness, characteristic of his attitude always. He pitied them with a vast pity, these toiling and suffering thousands, who did not know their own power. Had they known it they would not have suffered another day. He personally saw no hope for them, their ultimate destiny the oblivion of an unknown grave. Such was his creed ; living, he pitied them ; dead, they would be at rest. His temperament, naturally slightly melancholy, had been greatly influenced by his dull life. He had never been out of the working area ; he seldom took a holiday, and the work was not congenial enough to atone. He had no initiative, an absence of motive or incentive had robbed his youth of its verve and enthusiasm.

Now he might have found a motive, that which makes men out of common clay, but his love was a woven part of his hereditary misfortune, doomed to disappointment and barrenness from its inception. Such was his view. He continued to endure ; the last claim upon his endurance, however, had made a heavy drain upon his resources. To him it was a secret relief that Janet Romaine would go back to her own class and

## The Contrast

kind, though he knew that with her going the outer darkness would descend upon the Isle of Dogs.

His thoughts reverted to Franklin Agar as he left the main thoroughfare and plunged into the gloom of the mean streets intervening between him and his home. For the first time in his life he had been smitten with a keen, passionate envy. Given opportunity, he might have been such an one. The same enthusiasm, the same power of expression, the ability to hold and move men—all might have been his. Why were they not? The eternal question of the injustice of things was driven home, and, for the first time, Merivale harboured it.

In a very bitter mood he reached the little wicket in the ragged hedge. He saw a light in the sitting-room windows, and was recalled suddenly to the fact of his sister's existence, also to the sharpness of his anxiety concerning her. As he went up the little path, the sound of voices floated through the half-open window, and he looked angry. He did not think it fitting that she should be alone at that late hour in the house with any man. He opened the door with more noise than usual, and stalked into the room with his hat in his hand.

Polly, his sister, was sitting in a rocking-chair, idly rocking to and fro, her hands folded in her

## The Fighting Line

lap, her hat, a gaudy thing, with a trimming of roses and forget-me-nots, lying on the floor at her side. She was a striking-looking girl, her colouring and style altogether out of the common, but so utterly unlike Merivale that nobody could have suspected the smallest relationship. He was very dark; she had a skin like milk and roses, large violet eyes, and wonderful hair of the true Venetian red. And with it all there was the ardent, almost ungovernable temperament which has shipwrecked many a woman similarly endowed. She had a common look, however. Unaware that plain, quiet garments would have accentuated every charm she possessed, she eschewed them, and affected bright colours and tawdry finery with which the East End seeks to redeem the greyness of its outlook and surrounding. She had a nonchalant, half-defiant air, and she smiled a trifle mockingly towards the door when her brother entered.

The man who stood by the table was three years younger than she—a fine specimen of his kind, well-built, sturdy, and strong, with looks, of a kind. But there was neither brain nor heart behind, and Merivale loathed him with a loathing unspeakable. There was not an inch of common ground in the whole order of things where they could meet. Vulgar, presuming, entirely satisfied with himself, and grudging others having a good

## The Contrast

time. A good time as understood by Ted Glazebrook would have been anathema to Merivale. Yet, because he had been strenuously making love to Polly for some months, and she appeared satisfied with him as a lover, Merivale had been obliged to meet and be civil to him. It had always been an effort, to-night it seemed an impossibility.

'You are a late caller, Glazebrook,' he said curtly. 'I suppose you waited for me.'

'Well, on this occasion I did,' answered Glazebrook, sitting down on the edge of the table and continuing to chew a straw dangling from his mouth. 'Just been tellin' Polly it's a sight easier to pop the question to 'er than to your lordship. We needn't beat about the bush; Polly and me's agreed, so we wants your blessing.'

'If you mean that you want to marry my sister,' answered Merivale quietly, 'I refuse my consent.'

Glazebrook edged himself off the table, and his face fell.

'Oh, come now, give a chap arf a charnst,' he said, in the sickening East-End drawl to which Merivale had never got accustomed. 'You were a bit more civil the larst time we met 'ere, which was larst Sunday night.'

Merivale hesitated a moment, looking at his sister, who sat forward, her face distinctly hardening.

## The Fighting Line

'Come on, Geo,' she said quickly. 'You've got to state your objections, you know, fair and square, though I don't suppose they'll make much difference to Ted an' me.'

'Thank you, Polly,' put in her lover, with an appreciative side-glance.

Merivale kept his eyes on Glazebrook's face.

'I prefer not to discuss the matter here before my sister,' he answered. 'If you will come outside, I'll tell you my objections with the greatest possible frankness.'

Glazebrook seemed to hesitate a moment, assuming a bullying air; but he was inwardly conscious that Merivale had the best of it, and he was not sure how the interview would end.

'Better go out and see which is the better man, Ted,' said Polly, with a little mocking smile. 'Coffee and pistols for two. Why can't you speak up like a man in front of me, Geo? I'm not afraid to hear what you've got to say, I assure you.'

Merivale turned on his heel, and went out. Glazebrook followed him, after taking a demonstrative farewell of his sweetheart.

'No, I won't come in again to-night, ole gel, and I promise you there won't be no bones broken. I'll remember 'e's your brother, though 'e don't look like it,' he added significantly. 'An' nobody 'ud believe it. I'll 'ear whatever it may be 'e 'as

## The Contrast

got to say, an' answer 'im. See yer next Sunday, same time an' place.'

Polly nodded, and he went out, closing the door after him.

Humming a scrap of song unconcernedly to herself, she went to the kitchen to see whether she could get something to eat. They had spent the evening in Greenwich Park, and it was a long time since tea.

The scullery window was open, and she could hear the sound of the men's voices outside. The direction from which they came indicated that they were in front, near the river's brim.

She found a bit of cold meat, and got herself a slice of bread and a glass of ale, off which she made a hearty supper, eating with a good, healthy appetite, undisturbed by any mental emotion.

Polly Merivale had her mind made up to live her own life as she pleased—in other words, to marry Ted Glazebrook, who had wooed her after the masterful manner of his class. She had decided that the time had come to remove herself from her brother's jurisdiction. She had long tired of him and his quiet ways, his gloomy views, his restrictions and old-fashioned ideas about what girls might and might not do. Polly had a healthier doctrine of life; she believed it had been given for use and enjoyment, and she meant to make the most of the gift. Glazebrook represented

## The Fighting Line

freedom and a good time, therefore she meant to have Glazebrook. Poor girl, her experience of life had been insufficient to warn her of the breakers ahead.

She had finished her supper, and was clearing it off the end of the kitchen table when Merivale came in through the open scullery door.

'Has Ted gone?' she asked casually.

'Yes, he's gone. I hope for good.'

'Oh, you do, do you? But you're not the only one to be consulted, Geo. Now he good enough to tell me what's your objection to my sweetheart. You've hinted a lot, but it's fair and square speaking we want and will have. I guess that you found Ted wouldn't take no less.'

'He's gone, saying very little,' answered Merivale quietly. 'I don't think he'll come back.'

She stood right in the middle of the uneven brick floor of the little kitchen, with her hands on her hips, a defiant figure, her big eyes gleaming ominously.

'Oh, you do, do you? Well, what's your objection to Ted? I'm waiting to hear it.'

'He's no fit husband for you, Polly, and very well he knows it.'

'I'm the judge of that, Geo, and I mean to be; he's a man, anyway, an' there's precious few of 'em about this sickenin' show.'

'But he's bad, a thorough scoundrel, Polly;



'WELL, WHAT'S YOUR OBJECTION TO TED? I'M WAITING  
TO HEAR IT.'



## The Contrast

he'd break your heart, my girl. There isn't an impulse of real kindness in him.'

'I don't know what that means, but I mean to have him, Geo,' she replied quietly. 'It's Charlie Freeman's been pouring his lies into your ears. He's got his knife in Ted ever since I sent him about his business. Can't you see through it? You old sheep.'

'Freeman has said very little. I have never liked Glazebrook, and I've made a few inquiries on my own behalf. His associates are bad, often criminal, prize-fighters, gamesters, even thieves, and he has no visible means of support. Why, my girl, you would go to misery as certain as the river flows past these walls.'

'But I won't ask you to keep me when I go for good,' she replied. 'I'm not one of them miserable, sneaking sort that'll come back crying for help, so you needn't be afraid.'

'I could always give the help, my dear,' he replied patiently. 'But I want to prevent the tragedy if I can. If Glazebrook shows his face here, it will be at his own risk.'

He left her there to infer what she liked. He had certainly dispatched the man he abhorred, cowed him, for the moment; but he did not know how to deal with his sister; never had the gulf between them seemed wider.

Merivale tossed upon his pillow and decided that

## The Fighting Line

he would, after all, ask Janet Romaine to intervene. Next day was Saturday; nothing much could happen, he told himself, in a day of four-and-twenty hours.

Polly was sleepless too, with anger and bitter determination. She would find ways and means of seeing her lover on the morrow, and put a few leading questions to him. Her brother's quietly confident assertion that he had dismissed him for good disconcerted her, but she would not give him up. To her distorted imagination, life with him represented all that she had been cheated out of in the dull years she had spent in the Isle of Dogs. Glazebrook was the world; she would see the world.

## CHAPTER V

### ' THE FRIEND '

POLLY was sullen next morning ; she did not come down to get her brother his early cup of tea, nor did she speak to him when he came back to breakfast between eight and nine oclock. She did not make him angry, however ; looking at her gloomy face, he was only conscious of a great pity. She was so very young, in spite of her twenty-five years of life ; that was his thought.

Polly had the East-End habit of appearing for the first half of the day in any kind of garb handy at the moment, and never failed to have a row of hair-curlers along her forehead. She kept the place clean, but herself untidy ; she saw no reason for dressing up, unless there was anybody to see her. George, of course, was nobody. He tried to set the example of personal tidiness himself, and was always presentable, even when he had to soil his hands, but it was no use ; she only laughed at him, and called him an old maid. How her ways jarred upon him he could never have told ; he suffered genuinely through them, and often regretted the

## The Fighting Line

sensitiveness of his temperament, which was unsuited to life in the Isle of Dogs.

She seemed specially slatternly that morning, with a short skirt of nondescript hue, by no means clean, and an old red blouse, minus most of the buttons. Also, she had laid the breakfast on the end of the kitchen table without any cloth, and the ashes of last night's fire still lay upon the hearth. George saw it all, but made no complaint. He tried to say good-morning cheerfully and kindly, as was his wont.

'It ain't a good morning,' she returned sourly. 'So wot's the good o' sayin' it is? It's rainin', an', goodness knows, it's worse than rainin' inside.'

'You didn't sleep, perhaps, Polly.'

'No, I didn't, an' I'm sick o' me life,' she answered. 'Nuthin' but a drudging char-woman I am, so there.'

She purposely lowered her accent to annoy him; he had sometimes tried to tell her what he would like her to become, had given her books to read, and tried to interest her in better things than dressing up in cheap finery, in which she would gad the streets or attend the cheap music-halls. She knew very well just what irritated and vexed him most, and she was in the mood to show him her very worst side.

'If you find the work too hard, get some one to

## The Friend

help you,' he said quietly, as he drew in his chair. 'I don't want to make a char-woman of you, and you know it.'

'A woman to 'elp! I wouldn't 'ave 'em, not if you gave me their weight in gold. Bring all sorts of things in 'ere wot wasn't before. There ain't any bacon for you, they didn't send it; a bloater or a hegg is all I've got.'

'Where's the porridge?'

'Adn't time to make it, the fire didn't burn up; you'd er 'ad it all smuts.'

She tossed a bloater from the pan to the plate, and set it before him, pushed the loaf towards him, and began to pour out the tea.

It was not an appetising meal, and had Merivale not been hungry, he could not have eaten it. He took it without a murmur, however, sitting opposite to the frowsy figure of Polly. He purposely abstained from any remarks of a disparaging nature, because he did not wish to aggravate her further. He had a scheme in his head for her rescue from the clutches of Glazebrook, a little plan which would take her away, and give him breathing-space till he could hit upon some ultimate and permanent good. He could not mention it yet, however, as he was by no means sure that he would be able to carry it through; it depended on another besides himself.

'We haven't seen anything of the Macbrides

## The Fighting Line

for a while, Polly. Have you ? ' he asked, leading up to the subject experimentally.

' No, nor I don' want to. Can't stand their psalm-singing, canting ways. I met 'er yesterday in the tunnel, but didn't give 'er no cuttings.'

' Why, what's the matter ? I thought you were good friends with Mrs. Macbride.'

' So I used to be, afore she began to think like other folks that I'm a biby to be lectured, and maybe whipped, when I don't do jes as they want.'

Merivale instantly surmised that Mrs. Macbride had been talking to Polly on the subject of Glazebrook, and he was afraid to say any more, but his little plan was nipped in the bud. He had heard that Mrs. Macbride was going into the country for a few days, and had meditated asking her to take his sister with her ; but Polly's attitude was unfavourable to the scheme. He said no more, but determined to see the Macbrides if possible that day, for the purpose of asking a little advice. They were his true friends, and people he could trust. They lived more near the Christ-life than any pair he knew in the world ; and their hearts were large enough for all sorts and conditions of men or women. The need of help was the only plea. The very thought of them comforted and strengthened him at the moment.

' Would you like to go up the river this after-

## The Friend

noon to Teddington, perhaps, or even farther ? ' he asked, as he prepared to go out. ' If you like to have dinner sharp I'll get home as quickly as I can.'

' No, thank you, I've me own roads to go,' she answered ungraciously.

He sighed a little as he went out and closed the door. If only she were a little girl again ! Since Polly was a woman grown the path had been beset with thorns. He blamed himself. Somehow in dealing with her, he had missed the way. He pondered on the tragedy of a girl-child left without a mother's care ; even an indifferent mother is a better guide than a blundering man.

Such was the trend of his thoughts, and the gloom was still over him when he left the works at two o'clock. He did not go straight home ; Polly was not conspicuous for punctuality with meals, and he felt the need of personal sympathy so strongly that he wanted to speak with some one who would understand before he saw her again.

It was the Macbrides' house he sought, the Mecca of many East-End pilgrims. It was a curious, quaint little house built near the river, where Macbride held an important engineering appointment. Merivale was very intimate there, and had a knock of his own. He was fortunate in finding Mrs. Macbride at home, and alone.

' My husband does not come in for dinner to-

## The Fighting Line

day,' she said, as she shook hands, her kind eyes full of welcome. 'I'm just getting ready to take a lot of bairns up to Kew. What's the matter, you look worried?'

'I am, therefore I am here. How are you? You look tired, and yet you never stop in your works of mercy.'

She shook her head.

'We never do enough; however long the day, and full the hours, we've always got to stop short of the end. Yes, I'm tired, but what of that?'

'Mac ought to cut you off.'

'From what?' she asked, with a sunny smile.

'From killing yourself for others.'

'He can't, and won't, because he's just the same,' she answered, with that fine ready smile which in the last ten years had made light in many a dark place down East. 'But what's all this for, eh?'

'Well, frankly, I'm come to add to your burden; it's Polly.'

She let her work drop on her lap, and her thin, eager face took a more serious look.

'I know. I've been expecting it, wondering why you didn't do something; in fact, I was coming round to-morrow, I said so to Mac yesterday. What a little fool she is!'

'Then you know about Glazebrook?'

'I met her the other night in the tunnel, coming from Greenwich. He isn't a safe man for your

## The Friend

sister to be with, Mr. Merivale—in fact, he's impossible ; it's got to be stopped.'

' But how ? '

' Oh, we'll find ways and means,' she answered brightly. ' I've seen worse tight places, and got out of them. We'll get Polly away ; I'm going out down to Frinton next week, after we get the flower-show over, and the old women's tea, and I'll take her with me.'

' If she'll go. She's angry with you at present. I mentioned your name to her this morning, and she looked daggers.'

' Oh, Polly's a mere baby, gets her lip down at nothing. I won't mind that. I'll get her away right enough. Ask her to come round to me to-morrow, will you ? '

' I'll tell her, but I warn you she mayn't come.'

' Well, if she doesn't, I'll come round to you.'

' Do, and Mac too ; Freeman will be there with his boy—and—and Miss Romaine, from the Settlement.'

' Ah ! '

Mrs. Macbride did not lift her eyes from the work this time, but her ear caught the cadence of Merivale's voice, and she knew ; but she did not say anything. What was the use ? With him, she believed the matter entirely hopeless. Caring for Merivale as she did, believing him to be one of the best men she had ever met, next to her own

## The Fighting Line

husband, she felt resentful that the peace of his life should have been thus disturbed. She knew Janet, however, and could not wonder at it. The pity of it was that she had ever come in his way.

‘I see,’ she said, quite naturally at last. ‘Her last Sunday, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, she’s going back to London next week.’

‘She was here yesterday; she seems sorry, genuinely sorry, I mean. She’s one of the few who are right in it; she really loves the work, I believe. She’s going to try to get back, she says, but she’s an only girl, and I’m not sure about her duty. You see, that’s the trouble; it may be her duty to stop there in the Cromwell Road, and to go out into society, just as it is ours to get up the treats for the bairns and old women. Nobody knows but God, and she’s got to settle it with Him, that’s what I told her.’

Merivale faintly smiled.

‘You don’t believe that?’ said Mrs. Macbride, with a little sharp note in her voice. ‘How is it you can get along without? But you don’t get along, you stick twenty times a day, and get up against stone walls; but you’re more obstinate than all the Scotsmen I’ve ever known in this world. Mac’s nothing to it.’

She often spoke in such vein to him, and it was the one yearning hope of this woman’s life that she might be able to guide Merivale into the light

## The Friend

where she lived herself. She had prayed often that the soul, so strong and fine, so well worth the winning, might be given her for her hire. And she never lost hope.

‘And what did she say? Will she settle it in the way you imagine?’

‘She’ll do her duty,’ replied Mrs. Macbride, with a quiet assurance. ‘But, honestly, I wish either that she had never come, or that she would come back to us altogether. She’s a power down here. She’s coming to the bairns’ show one evening soon. You ought to come and see her amongst them, it’s a treat. Freeman’s going to speak; I don’t want him, but Mac will have him; he says he can get at the bairns better than anybody, and that he isn’t far from the Kingdom.’

‘Far from the Kingdom,’ repeated Merivale, as he rose to his feet. ‘I wonder——’

She laid her hand on his shoulder as he turned to leave the little room—the kind hand that had helped to heal many a sore wound.

‘All things work together,’ she said softly. ‘Well, are you going? If Polly does not turn up here by four o’clock, I’ll run round. Mac will come in after Sunday-school.’

‘I didn’t tell you what I came for, after all,’ he paused at the door to say. ‘I was at Agar’s meeting last night, and when I got home, Glazebrook was in the house with Polly. He

## The Fighting Line

asked permission—at least, I suppose he meant to ask—that they might marry. I told him, no. Then I took him outside and gave him my reasons. I'd rather see her in the river, poor girl, than married to such a man.'

'So would I; but Polly can't be contemplating marrying him, surely——'

'She is, and my fear is that she'll run away with him, or something of that sort.'

'She must be prevented. I'll see her to-day, whatever happens.'

'Thank you. I knew you would be the good friend.' He hesitated. 'Mrs. Macbride, I am not easy in my mind. Do—do you think I've done my duty by my sister? I've tried to be kind to her, but we don't understand one another.'

'No, how could you? You are of a different breed. Often I say to Mac, you must have come out of different nests. You've been very good to her—better than she deserves. Don't you worry! There's nothing to reproach yourself with.'

'But she's had a dull life. I'm dull myself. I've no understanding of a girl like Polly.'

'That may be true enough, but you can't help the way you're made,' answered Mrs. Macbride shrewdly. 'She's had a good home and a kind brother, and not known how to appreciate them; that's how I look at it.'

'I hope you're right, you generally are,' said

## The Friend

Merivale, as he shook hands and went his way, comforted, as he never failed to be, by his visit to the little house near the river side.

'Mac,' said the little woman to her husband when he came in, big and strong and kind, bringing a breath of freshness from the outer air, 'George Merivale has been here, and I've discovered two things.'

'Spyin' ferlies, as usual, wife?' said the engineer with his ready smile.

'He's in love with Miss Romaine, and it's with him as you say of Freeman. He's not far from the Kingdom.'

## CHAPTER VI

### LIFE'S THE THING

SUNDAY morning broke grey and quiet and very still. Merivale rose early, got himself a cup of tea, and went out for a walk, leaving Polly still in bed. He glanced back as he opened the wicket in the hedge, and saw that her blind was still down. She was very lazy on Sunday mornings ; often there was not a fire lit in the house till ten o'clock. Merivale had found it a good plan to take long walks on Sunday morning, often not getting back till there was some prospect of dinner being ready. It had not occurred to him that he ought to have been more exacting where Polly was concerned, that allowing her to drift, to have her way in most things, was thoroughly bad for her ; but he was naturally so much a man of peace that he bore his domestic discomfort in silence.

Polly had taken advantage of his good-nature, as the selfish person will, that was all.

Merivale was very fond of London in the quiet of the early morning, when all the traffic was stilled, and only a stray milk-cart or a belated dray rattled

## Life's the Thing

through the streets, usually choked with traffic. The long, even line of the Barking Road seemed not unbeautiful, especially if there was a sunny haze upon it. Sometimes he took a train out a bit in the country, where he would dream of what life was like for happier men who could live there and get away from the soul-destroying and depressing influences of East London.

Merivale took the gloomy view natural to a keenly sensitive and highly strung nature, almost entirely devoid of a sense of humour. He had often been struck by the laughter of the Macbrides, by their keen appreciation of the little comedies perpetually being played under their eyes, by the brightness they were able to extract from everyday life and common things. And this without detracting in the least from their serious realisation of the problems around them, of which they had a better knowledge and a keener grip than most.

To Merivale life seemed unrelieved gloom. Doubtless this was largely due to the lack of personal happiness in his own life, to the longing for a home in the true sense, a longing destined, he believed, to perpetual disappointment.

He passed by the Settlement where Janet Romaine was living, and slackened his steps a little, regarding it with that lingering and reverent tenderness characteristic of the man towards the abode of the woman he loves. It was just half-

## The Fighting Line

past six ; doubtless she would be still asleep, tired with the labours of the previous day. When he had passed the great doors he turned down a side street towards the docks, and there, a few steps ahead, he saw her coming in her nurse's garb, the familiar black bag in her hand. His face flushed ; hers did not, though her surprise was very great.

'What are you doing up at this hour ?' she asked, almost gaily. 'I thought that people who worked hard all the week, like you, were privileged on Sundays. Surely you have an uneasy conscience ?'

'I may easily have, though this is a habit of mine. I often have a walk early on Sunday morning ; I like the quiet ; it is the only time there is room in West Ham. Where have you been ?'

'At a case for Sister Kate. No, not all night, only since four o'clock. It was only a simple case, a baby with croup, and she told me what to do. Of course, I'm not a real nurse, only a make-believe, but I can obey directions, and the baby is all right.'

'I can't picture you in these hovels——'

'Oh, this wasn't a hovel. Decent people, out of work seven months. It's appalling. I'm getting up a case for my uncle Agar, setting forth certain facts,' she said brightly. 'He's very open-minded, so I believe it'll do good. That'll be my work when I am really away from this dear place.'

## Life's the Thing

He elevated his brows as he glanced down the squalid street, with its prison-like wall in front. She nodded slowly, fully understanding his expression.

'Are you going into the country? How far you will have to go! Have you ever been in the real country, as the children call it? How I wish you could come down to us in Stafford. Would you come if you were invited in the proper way?' She put the question shyly. He shook his head.

'I should be the round peg in the square hole,' he replied. 'I must not keep you standing here. Will you be too tired to come to us this afternoon?'

'Tired! I am very strong; you don't know how strong. Good-bye. Don't pull such a long face; don't you see the sun shining? It's the same sun; God made it.'

She gave a little flutter of her grey veil and flitted away. It seemed to Merivale that the sun went with her, but the afternoon was still ahead. Dreaming of it, he was able to put in the intervening hours.

When he returned to the house about noon Polly had taken another thought. The house was swept and garnished, a clean cloth laid on the sitting-room table, an appetising odour pervading the house. She was not very neat herself, certainly, though the row of curlers suggested the effects that might

## The Fighting Line

be produced later on. She smiled when she saw her brother come in.

'So there you are! Can't think why you don't stop in bed of a Sunday morning, instead of wandering about, goodness knows where, through them dismal streets. Don't you git enough of 'em the week days? I do. Suppose you're starvum' by now. Well, it's ready, a'most. I jes thought you'd be comin' in like this early, so I 'urried up.'

Merivale smiled, cheered by Polly's change of front. He had enjoyed his walk, and would have shared his experiences, but Polly was in a hurry.

'Jes wait while I tike out me bangs, they ain't pretty. Oh, you needn't tell me.'

George had not been going to tell her anything. He was perfectly prepared to agree, and had sometimes felt that the man who invented the hair-curlers should have at the same time invented some punishment for those who wore them in the sight of inoffensive people.

'Where 'ave you bin?' inquired Polly, when she came down from her bedroom ten minutes later, with shining face, and hair in full glory—rather too full—round her pretty, pert face.

'Only to the park, and loafing about down Greenwich way. I met Sally Prince taking her little brothers and sisters out for the day. She's a good sort, Sally, it's a pity she hasn't a happier life.'

## Life's the Thing

'There ain't none of us 'appy down 'ere; 'wy should we be, Geo? 'Appiness ain't hevery-think.'

'It's a good deal,' observed George, as he watched her pour the water off the potatoes. 'It's what most people want in this world, and don't get.'

'Well, I dunno. I don' mind about being 'appy so much. I want to *live*, 'appy or not 'appy. Smells good, that bit of beef do. I've 'ad Mrs. Macbride round this mornin'.'

'This morning? I thought she usually went to church.'

'So she does, but she took a dy off purpuss of comin' to see me, to jaw about Ted. I told 'er it warn't a bit of use, I'm goin' to 'ave 'im, Geo.'

'You are?'

'Yes, come an' sit down. Yes, I mean to 'ave 'im, so wot's the good?'

Merivale drew in his chair.

'It's all chanst wiv men, Geo; some's good, some's t'other thing, mostly t'other.'

Still Merivale did not speak.

Polly was now neither sullen nor aggressive, but not a whit less determined. If anything, it was a more difficult mood.

'You know how he earns his living, I suppose?'

'W'y, of course, I went to Mile End t'other night to see 'im fight the Slogger. An' 'e gave it to 'im too; my, it was fine.'

## The Fighting Line

'He consorts with the lowest. They say he has a wife living, too, somewhere else.'

'That I don't b'lieve,' answered Polly unconcernedly. 'An' if 'e 'ad, I'm not afraid of 'er, I kin 'old me own.'

Merivale cut up his meat in silence. How was it possible to discuss the question with such an one? What code of ethics or morals would appeal?

'He is without principles. Your happiness, God forgive the word, would depend just upon how long you can keep him attached to you.'

'I ain't afraid,' said Polly quietly. 'I'm goin' to try a new experiment. Look 'ere, Geo,' she added presently, dropping her voice to a somewhat confidential whisper and leaning her elbows on the table, 'you leave me alone. I've 'ad enough of this dull life. We don' gi: on; you're a soft muff, an' always was. W'y don' you marry Mrs. Tolworthy? She'd jump at you fast enough; she has a tidy little business, and she'd keep your 'ouse all right. She knows 'ow it ought to be done, I don't.'

'What put such a thing into your head?'

'It would be a splendid thing fer you, Geo, an' she'd jump at it. She's got money saved, an' you carn't live 'ere wivout somebody, you ole sheep.'

'Then I'll shut up shop and go into lodgings. But I don't believe you're going, Polly.'

## Life's the Thing

'Oh, yes, I am, don't you make any mistake,' she replied cheerfully. 'Soon's Ted's ready, we're off.'

'Never, with my consent, Polly.'

'Then we'll go wivout it; but wot's agin Mrs. Tolworthy?'

'I've never spoken to her in my life.'

'Oh, that don't matter; she knows you, an' you have spoken to 'er. She was 'ere onst on a Sunday w'en Miss Romaine come fust, an' you didn't like it. I remember you didn't think she was good enough.'

Merivale remained silent a moment, then burst out laughing. Polly certainly possessed the charm of unexpectedness, you never knew where she would break out.

'Talkin' ov Miss Romaine. I won't be in this arternoon, if she's comin', but Mrs. Mac 'll be along, so you won't miss me.'

'I'd rather you were here, Polly——'

'Don' put Miss Romaine on to me, Geo, I couldn't stand it. Wot does she know abart us, anyhow? She's only playin' the gime, an' not fair at that. It's all very easy w'en yer kin go back as soon as you're tired of it. She'll make fun of us up West.'

Merivale made no reply.

'There's some tea-cake, an' I'll cut the bread-an'-butter afore I go out. Mrs. Mac 'll get the rest,' she explained. 'An' yer kin give the

## The Fighting Line

company me compliments, an' tell 'em I ham otherwise hengaged.'

'Are you going out with Glazebrook?'

'Yus, to the Forest. A party of us, a sort of bean-feast, won't be 'ome till late.'

There was no more to be said. Polly cleared off the meat course, and put a dish of junket on the table. She had taken pains to get her brother a good dinner, and he enjoyed it. Her cheerful, high spirits were infectious, and he began to think that perhaps he had needlessly troubled himself. After all, to live one's life according to one's light is the natural desire of every man, why not Polly? Perhaps she had found her mate. Why try to keep her from him, or to chain her to an environment against which her spirit chafed?

## CHAPTER VII

### THE LITTLE LAD

MANNY awoke with a start, and then remembered with a little rush of joy that it was Sunday, and he would have his father all to himself. He raised himself cautiously and glanced across the room to the open door of his father's little bedroom, where he lay asleep; his face was turned towards the communication door, so that Manny could see how sound was his sleep—the dreamless sleep of the physically tired.

Manny sighed a little as he lay back. It was hard to wait when there was so much to say, but he had learned his lesson to perfection. He had been awake himself from the dawn, but nothing would have tempted him to disturb his father.

Manny did not have good nights; he had to lie so continuously on his back, and he got so little fresh air, that there was nothing to induce sleep. He had the patient white face of the invalid, but his expression was as beautiful as his features. At times he looked very childish, though his real age was fourteen. His long, white fingers played

## The Fighting Line

with the fringes of the old rug which served as a counterpane, and he fixed his eyes bravely on the picture hanging above the mantelpiece. It meant much to Manny, that old engraving of the knight buckling on his sword. The words underneath it were these: 'Putting on the whole armour of God.'

How often had it been explained by his father with a loving care, until now the knight had become an old friend.

An Ishmaelite outside Freeman might be, with his hand against every man, but in that little Camberwell room he lived a lovely life, and was holy in the eyes of his little son. They had great times together, their only dull days being those on which Manny suffered.

The milk-prams were rattling in the street below. The cheerful 'milk-oh' was a greeting of which Manny was never tired. And presently, through the open window, he heard Adelaide, the servant of the house, at the area steps, having her 'morning word' with the youth of the clean linen jacket and cheerful voice.

Manny smiled. He liked all the sights and sounds of the outer world—the world he saw so seldom. He took the greatest interest in Albert Edward the milkman, in Grimes the dustman, in Adelaide and all her little affairs. A good many of these affairs found their way to Manny's

## The Little Lad

room. Only yesterday she had confided to him that she was in a strait betwixt two—viz. Albert Edward and Clarence Jones, the butcher. Manny inclined towards Albert Edward, because Clarence had a guttural voice and a beard all round. Manny, a connoisseur in looks, judging all by the standard of his king among men, decided in favour of Albert. But Clarence was on his 'own' and doing well, whereas Albert Edward was only a 'round,' which meant that he received so much a week for his daily journeys with the milk-pram and his use of the musical voice.

The cheerful talk from the area gate came up through the quiet air and awoke Freeman. He opened his eyes, and immediately turned towards his boy.

'Well, old chap, what's o'clock?'

'Half-past seven, dad,' replied the boy, with an affectionate smile.

'That all? What a noise they're making below. I'll have to talk to Adelaide.'

'Oh, no, daddy, it's Albert Edward. Sunday mornin's his best chance, the other don't come.'

Freeman laughed, and stretched himself.

'A regular match-maker you are, Manny; best look out. Matrimony don't stand meddling with. What kind of a night?'

'All right; I only woke up three times. You've been snoring, daddy.'

## The Fighting Line

'Why didn't you get at me? I've told you before, Manny, you mustn't let me disturb you; I don't want to.'

'And I don't want to disturb you,' replied Manny joyfully. 'I can sleep in the daytime, you can't.'

'Well, what would you like to do to-day?'

'Dunno. What have you to do?'

'Wonder of wonders! nothing—at least, not till five o'clock, then the park. Want a treat, old man?'

The boy's eyes sparkled.

'If you're at home all day, that'll be a treat.'

'We're going to the Isle of Dogs, to Uncle George's.'

'Again, daddy? Why, it's only three weeks since we've bin there.'

'We're asked again. Feel equal to it, eh?'

'Oh, yes.' The lad's face positively shone.

'And will she be there again?'

'Who?'

'The beautiful lady in the nurse's bonnet.'

'Yes, I think so. The party's for her; she's going away. It's a sort of good-bye to the Isle of Dogs.'

'Where's she going to?'

'Back to her own house. She lives in London, Manny, down West; she belongs to them.'

'To the rich rulers?'

'Yes, to the rich rulers.'

## The Little Lad

' Oh, I see ; but she ain't like them, dad ? She don't want to keep everything to herself ? '

' No, that she don't ; but she's mischievous all the same, like the rest of them. Some of them do more harm giving things away than not.' It was a dark saying, like many of his father's utterances. Manny accepted it in perplexed silence.

' But, daddy, you were very tired last time you carried me. It's such a long way.'

Freeman laughed.

' It'll be a queer day when I can't carry you that far, captain. Suppose I had better get up, hadn't I ? '

' Yes, and please may I have Robinson in ? '

Robinson was a piping bullfinch in a red and blue cage. He began to pipe so early in the mornings that he had to be put out on the landing window overnight. Freeman jumped up, opened the door cautiously, and, discerning nobody, reached out for the bird-cage, which he placed by the boy's side.

Manny instantly opened the door and the little creature came out with a delighted chirrup. Sitting on Manny's chest, he began to pipe, low and softly, with his pretty head a little to one side, and a full air of conscious pride. Manny's face was a study ; the bird had been a gift from Adelaide, who had saved up for a long time to present this to her darling.

## The Fighting Line

It was Manny who kept Adelaide in the Camberwell Road, the slave of Mrs. Skimmins. She had been long fitted for a better sphere. A foundling, discovered on a doorstep in a neighbouring crescent, she had been promptly called after it, her full name being Adelaide Camberwell. She had passed through the usual phases familiar to nobody's child; Mrs. Skimmins had been her first mistress. She was known on both sides of the Camberwell Road now as Skimminses' Hadelade, a distinction likely to remain with her. She served the house for the modest sum of twelve pounds a year, but that was not the full coin in which she was paid. It represented only an exacting mistress's share of it; it was the Freemans who paid her, father and son, in kind consideration, in gratitude and devotion, for much comfort—indeed, the only comfort they had in life. Freeman himself really did not know how much he owed to her care for his suffering lad. He had to be out a great deal in London, and often away in other places, speaking for the various causes to which he was pledged; in his absence he had no anxieties concerning Manny, Adelaide being not only servant, but friend, nurse, companion, more than mother. Freeman accepted it perhaps too much now as a matter of course.

Hearing them talk, she was promptly at the door with Manny's cup of tea. Freeman shut

## The Little Lad

the door between, and through it he could hear the crooning notes of her voice as she tended the baby. And he thought casually what a heart she had, and how the fine gold of the earth was often to be found in unexpected places.

'Isle of Dogs agin?' she said discontentedly. 'Wonder if 'e'd tike me?'

'Oh, I'll ask him,' said Manny joyfully. 'Open the door a tiny bit, will you, and I'll just ask him now?'

But Adelaide shook her head.

'Don't yer go fer to worrit yer pore favver, 'e's got enuff, 'e 'as. Say, Manny, yer should a' 'eard Halbert Hedward this mornin', 'e was goin' on somethink horful.'

'I did hear him; but what was it all about?'

'I mustn't tell. It ain't the clean potito,' she said mysteriously. 'There's goin' to be a jewel somewheres; jes wait, an' see the pipers on it.'

'A what?'

'A jewel fought in the park, all along of me,' she said, nodding delightedly. 'Halbert Hedward ses 'e won't 'ave that Jones rubbich 'angin' round 'ere. "Mister Jones," ses I, "hif yer please"; then 'e looked somethink horful.'

'Which are you going to have, Adelaide, really?'

'None of 'em,' she replied, with a toss of her pretty head. 'I'm a-goin' to wait till yer grows up.'

## The Fighting Line

Freeman opened the door at the moment, and she drew back. Adelaide stood a little in awe of Freeman, who had seldom much to say; also she believed him to be a very great and clever person, ever since she had journeyed on a certain May Day to Hyde Park to hear him hold forth under the Heroes' Tree. She had not understood a word of what it was all about, which only helped to increase her respect.

'Mornin', sir. 'E's all right ter-day,' she said quickly. 'Isle of Dogs again? It'll be the Continong next.'

Freeman smiled.

'It's a special day, Adelaide.'

'Oh, daddy, Adelaide wants to go; can't we take her?' asked Manny eagerly.

'Why, yes, of course, why not? Can you come, Adelaide; you know Mr. Merivale?'

'Well, if it warn't no intrusion, I'd like, sir, to see that queer place they calls the Isle of Dogs.'

'Very well, be ready at half-past two, and we'll go along together.'

Freeman spent the whole morning with his boy, reading and talking to him, with the window pushed up as high as it would go so that they could watch the people going to church. The bells made a joyous clangour everywhere; right up among the trees at St. Saviour's Church they played a regular tune, of which Manny never tired.

## The Little Lad

Incidentally Freeman returned to the subject of the meeting on Friday evening at the Lambeth Baths. He had long known Franklin Agar very well by sight, and had heard him speak on unimportant occasions, but his deliverance on the burning question of the hour had staggered Freeman ; he had been obliged to concede to him a grip of the subject, a profound insight into conditions of life his class could not generally understand ; and personally, he had been oddly attracted by the man. He did not wish to feel like that ; it was his daily bread to be antagonistic, to fight for the principles he held. Agar represented the power which was not used in the right direction, which, if not actually abused, was at least barren and unfruitful in the directions where its intervention was most needed.

‘ It’s easy for men like him, Manny,’ he said. ‘ He had a diamond pin in his tie which would have kept a poor family for a year.’

‘ Did it shine, dad ? ’

‘ Yes ; had he been a wise man, with a real desire to drive his arguments home, he would have left his diamonds at home on his dressing-room table in Park Lane.’

‘ Is that where he lives, dad ? ’

‘ There or thereabouts, I haven’t really troubled to inquire ; we’re not on visiting terms. Your Uncle George liked him though, and the lady with

## The Fighting Line

the nurse's bonnet was on the platform ; she belongs to them, you see, that's why we don't really want her in the Isle of Dogs.'

' But we do want her, dad, at least Uncle George does. I could see him look as if he did.'

Freeman brought down his fist with a little bang on the table.

' She's spoiling your Uncle George's life, that's what she's doing,' he said, so fiercely that Robinson retreated hastily to the farthest corner of his cage.

Manny continued to look perplexed. There were many things he did not understand, and many which puzzled his active brain ; but of the kindness of people he had no doubt at all. In spite of his oftentimes weary back, the world was a very beautiful place to the invalid lad.

## CHAPTER VIII

### MUMMERS ALL

THE electric brougham glided smoothly through the throng of the Barking Road and drew up with a little click at the Settlement door. Janet Romaine knew that click. Tying her bonnet-strings at the little looking-glass in her own room, she stepped forward to the window and looked out in dismay. Yes, it was Judy alighting, with a little shimmer of white diaphanous robes under a silk dust-cloak. She glanced up at Janet's window with a bewildering smile.

'Now what shall I do? It's certain I can't take Judy to the Isle of Dogs, and I won't stop away myself.'

She glanced at her watch. A quarter to four. She had promised to be there at four.

'Get her tea, listen to her chatter, get her away,' she mused, as she ran quickly down the stairs. 'That'll bring me easily to five o'clock. What a nuisance Judy is!'

She found her standing in the little hall alone. The Settlement was generally rather empty on a Sunday afternoon.

## The Fighting Line

It was impossible to be angry with Judy ; she had a dear, pink, childlike face, with a cunning dimple in her chin, and the most innocent eyes.

'Dear Jen, you don't want me, I can see,' she said. 'Let me efface myself.'

'Come in, and don't be stupid, Judy,' said Janet, as she gave her a little kiss. 'But why do you always choose the inconvenient season ?'

'What have you on ? If it's a case, take me ; I'm thirsting for a new sensation ; everything has palled.'

'Where's Harold ? He promised to come one day before I went home.'

'We quarrelled this morning, and he has gone to Cookham, to the Lockharts'. He was in a Nonconformist mood. I came down because I'm seriously considering the East End as a career.'

Janet regarded her with some severity, mingled with some perplexity. What should she do with her ? What would be her effect on the social atmosphere at the little tea-party to which Janet herself wished to go ? Would it be safe ?

'You are planning how to get rid of me, Jen ; I see it in your eyes. What have you on ; can't I fit myself in ?'

'I don't think so. But I suppose I must risk it, Judy, or stop away myself.'

Judy shook her diaphanous skirts, well pleased.

'I knew you wouldn't fail me, Jen ; you never do,

## Mummers All

though you can be vastly disagreeable. That's like Harold. It was my school that gave me my fine manners. We were taught that feelings ought never to be hurt. Why are not all politicians and serious-minded persons taught the duty of politeness ?'

'So you quarrelled with Harold ? What about ?' asked Janet, as they went out to the carriage.

'It was the wrong word. I don't quarrel, we only fenced a bit. I lunched with Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Hugo this morning, and it is Wednesday they expect you home. I realised that was my last chance, and ordered Bateson at once.'

Janet's face clouded as she turned it away. They escaped the little crowd that had gathered to inspect the horseless carriage, and the chauffeur, with his nose in the air, beheld their coming with relief. He did not like the running commentary of the Barking Road. Janet gave him a few directions, and they glided away.

'It was about the Van Vorsts we collided,' said Judy, in an injured voice. 'They've taken Bowood for Ascot, and asked me ; Harold won't let me go. I want to go so badly, only he says I mustn't ; he was quite brutal this morning. He has no *savoir faire* nor any sense of humour. It is my sense of humour that enables me to swallow the Van Vorsts.'

'Who are they, anyhow ?' inquired Janet. 'I have never even heard of them, but they sound ominous.'

## The Fighting Line

'Who they are is the last thing that matters,' replied Judy airily. 'They're South African, of course—the name labels them—and they have the De Voicey's house for the season. Cecile says they simply never asked the price; it was the only house left, and they were bound to have it. They've rather taken to me, and they're useful; Harold won't see it.'

'I shouldn't think he would,' said Janet drily.

'But don't you see?' said Judy plaintively. 'He's a fool for himself. We're almost stony; and if he's to get on, we must get money from somewhere. He spoke in the House the other night—Aliens Bill, I believe—and Agar congratulated him. He will get on, only, you see, he needs me, and he won't let me paddle my own canoe.'

'You can't keep in the safe waters, Judy. What a little fool you are! Don't you know there are hardly any men so good as Harold left? He's far too good for you.'

'Right. He has not a redeeming vice,' replied Judy meekly. 'That's why the Van Vorsts, with all their primeval instincts, form an alluring diversion. Where are we going? Does anybody live here?'

They had turned round a sharp corner, and were now in the narrow, squalid street flanked by the high wall of Larmer's works on the one side and the County Council buildings—their model

## Mummers All

buildings for the working-classes—on the other. So narrow was the middle way, so high the houses, the sun seemed to be shut out.

‘Yes, seven hundred families.’

‘Families!’ shrieked Judy. ‘I thought it was a gaol. Are we going into any of them?’

‘Not just here,’ answered Janet. ‘Do you see that ragged hedge? There’s a little house inside it; that’s where we’re going.’

‘What for? Are you going to nurse somebody, or pray for them, or what?’

‘Neither. I am going out to tea.’

‘What fun! Real slums, eh? Will they expect me to hold the baby?’

‘There isn’t a baby,’ said Janet. ‘And you will try and behave yourself, Judy Beltravers, and hold your tongue.’

She pulled the cord, and the brougham stopped at the wicket in the ragged hedge.

‘What a dear, funny little place! Who lives here?’ inquired Judy interestedly.

‘Some friends of mine. Even if you are not interested, Judy, I charge you to behave yourself,’ repeated Janet severely.

The sound of their voices was carried round the gable of the cottage, and Merivale, catching it, came quickly to them. He was bareheaded. Judy cast a quick glance of admiration at him. He had a fine figure, which he carried with unconscious

## The Fighting Line

grace. She liked the blue serge suit, the soft collar, the careless knot of the red tie.

'A dear Socialist, Jen, I am sure; how delicious!' she whispered.

'Good afternoon, Mr. Merivale,' said Janet, with a smile. 'I must apologise for bringing an uninvited guest. This is my cousin, Lady Beltravers. She happened to call on me this afternoon, and I had either to bring her or to stop away. Judy, let me introduce Mr. George Merivale.'

'Charmed to meet you, Mr. Merivale,' said Judy, with one of her sweetest smiles—which was very sweet indeed. 'Since my cousin has taken to slumming in earnest, she has introduced us to quite a number of new types.'

It was an atrocious speech. Janet lifted her eyes with a little appeal in them to Merivale's face. He was quick to appreciate it, and smiled back at Lady Judy's face.

'We are happy if we can furnish anything of interest to Lady Beltravers,' he answered gravely.

Janet smiled at the back of her mind, though her face was quite grave. She stepped forward, leaving them to follow, and privately wondering what Judy would say to the vagaries of Polly, should she happen to preside at the tea-table. For Polly was quite irrepressible, and indifferent to the impression she made. A tea-table was spread, but no Polly visible. Instead, Mrs. Macbride sat

## Mummers All

in the old basket-chair beside it, looking very thin and worn. When Janet saw her, she ran forward.

'Don't get up, dear Mrs. Mac. Oh, I'm so very glad to see you! But how tired you look.'

'It's very nice here, isn't it?' she asked, with a movement of her hand towards the river. 'You aren't alone to-day, I see——'

'No. It is my cousin, Lady Beltravers. I have left her with Mr. Merivale. But where are Mr. Freeman and Manny?'

'Coming presently, and my husband, too, after Sunday-school. I did not go this afternoon, as Mr. Merivale wanted me to be here early.'

'Polly's not at home?' asked Janet, and it might be that there was a little relief in her voice.

'No, she's only been gone about ten minutes. Didn't you meet her?'

'I thought I saw her as we drove,' said Janet. 'Isn't this a picture, Judy? You might be miles from Poplar or the Barking Road.'

Lady Beltravers clasped her hands.

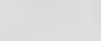
'It's lovely, unique, Turneresque. Mr. Merivale, surely this is the last thing in sensations, to live here on the river's brim in a little oasis in the desert, as it were. I begin to understand a little bit the fascination the East End has for my cousin. It has undoubted compensations.'

Janet introduced Mrs. Macbride, and Merivale found Lady Beltravers a chair. At the moment,



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## The Fighting Line

more voices sounded, and he was off again to receive the Freemans—Manny being carried like a baby in his father's arms, Adelaide walking demurely behind. At the sight of the little party on the lawn, she stood stock still, afraid to move another step. Janet sprang forward and kissed Manny, where he lay in his father's arms. Presently he was laid on the old couch which Merivale had wheeled from the sitting-room for his use, and he gave a sigh of perfect content. Freeman was warm and tired. He wiped the moisture from his brow as he stepped back.

'I'll just go inside a moment, George,' he said to Merivale, who nodded, and after a second, followed him.

'Who are they, Janet? I want to know all about everybody,' whispered Judy. 'And what's the matter with the boy?'

'Spine,' whispered Janet. 'He comes here for a little treat, his father is devoted to him. He is Freeman the Socialist; you know his name.'

'And the young lady in the feathers?'

Janet smiled. 'I am not sure; she must be the maid from the house they live in, I think.'

'It's Adelaide,' put in Manny, in his shrill whisper. 'And she was so excited over coming, she lost count of the stations. But I know 'em, there's eleven.'

'How's the back to-day, eh?' asked Janet, as she knelt on the soft, dry turf beside the old couch.

## Mummers All

'It don't hurt much, not when father carries me. The train's a bit jolty, that's all. My, isn't it fine here?'

'I'll go in and see about tea, I think,' said Mrs. Macbride.

When she left them, Judy walked to the edge of the river's brim and stood looking up and down.

'You never told me anything about this, Janet. What a sly monkey you are!'

In spite of herself, Janet felt her colour rise.

'What do you mean, Judy?'

'What I say. The East End has its compensations. These interesting men, with looks any of us might envy.'

'Judy, you are horrible; there is nothing of that kind.'

'But there will be immediately. You've created an atmosphere for yourself, I can see. Oh, Janet, what's the use of pretending? We're all alike, slummers or mummers. It's the primeval instinct that prevails with us in the end.'

Janet had not time to reply, perhaps also she had not for the moment any words ready. Could there be any truth in her cousin's words? She was of the world, worldly, but she had a shrewd perception, and no hesitation about calling things by their right names. Janet's eyes were downcast, her air subdued, as she went back to the side of Manny's couch.

## CHAPTER IX

### A NEW SENSATION

‘**M**RS. MAC,’ said Janet, ‘tell Lady Beltravers about your work among the children. She has none of her own,’ she added, with a smile. ‘But she’s a mother in Israel all the same, and numbers her children by the score.’

‘Yes, do tell me all about them. I love children—at least, I think I should, only I’ve never had any. There doesn’t seem to be time to fit them in.’

Mrs. Mac shook her head. The Scotswoman, with her large endowment of common-sense, had not at first known what to make of the new element, but at least it was good for money, and money was always needed.

‘If I begin, Miss Romaine, shall I ever end? Lady Beltravers would be tired.’

‘Tell her about them when the tunnel was opened first, that’s the funniest,’ said Manny, clapping his hands.

‘What tunnel,’ inquired Lady Beltravers.

‘The Blackwall Tunnel that goes under the river,’ said Manny eagerly. ‘It’s all shiny white tiles and electric lights; there’s fifteen hundred of

## A New Sensation

them,' cried the boy excitedly. The tunnel was a favourite subject with him.

'What? Under the river! What becomes of the water?'

'It's on the top, of course.'

'Doesn't it break through?'

'Oh, no, 'cos the engineer is always watchin' it, isn't he, Mrs. Mac?'

Mrs. Mac nodded.

'Perhaps some day Lady Beltravers will come and see it all,' she said, as she began to place the cups in a row. 'The first day the tunnel was opened the children swarmed through, and when they came out on the other side and saw the green fields and the flowers, they simply leaped over the fences and pulled up everything. It was not the real country, you see, only a market-garden, and they thought the carrots and turnips and cabbages were flowers. They came back with their aprons and pinafores full.'

'Poor darlings. Why doesn't anybody give them flowers?'

'Well, nobody has any here. We've a flower-mission, and a window-box guild, and they grow wonderful things. Next week we have——'

She stopped abruptly, for Merivale and Freeman stepped out of the house. Lady Beltravers looked up interestedly; she was enjoying herself immensely.

'Introduce me to the individual with the fiery

## The Fighting Line

eyes,' she whispered to Janet. 'His red tie is ravishingly becoming.'

They came forward looking perfectly at their ease. Judy could see that, of the two, Merivale was the gentleman in the accepted sense of the word, but Freeman interested her the more.

'This is my cousin, Lady Beltravers, Mr. Freeman,' said Janet clearly.

Judy held out her languid and very beautiful white hand. But Freeman merely lifted his cap, and after a moment laid it down on Manny's couch.

Judy smiled, and made a little *moue* at her cousin, who affected not to see it.

'Do come and sit down here, Mr. Freeman, and tell me things,' said Lady Beltravers, with her little imperious smile. 'You are one of those dear things who hold forth in Hyde Park, aren't you?—and you want to sweep us all away. Now look at me, and tell me, am I not perfectly inoffensive?'

'Do be quiet, Judy,' said Janet quickly. 'Never mind my cousin, Mr. Freeman. She talks a lot.'

'I am afraid we all do,' replied Freeman easily. 'I plead guilty, Lady Beltravers, to being one of the dear things who hold forth in the park while your ladyship rides by; but I have never been called a dear thing before—I always understood that you had other epithets to bestow.'

She laughed and clapped her hands; Merivale smiled a little, but not very spontaneously. Some-

## A New Sensation

how, the sight of Lady Beltravers in her radiant frock, the indescribable air which set her apart, seemed to accentuate the immeasurable gulf betwixt him and Janet Romaine. For though she masqueraded among them in the garb of a sisterhood, she really belonged to the other world. She was going back to it, and this was the last day. Doubtless, in days to come, the story of this tea-party would be told, with exaggerations perhaps, to amuse another tea-party.

Janet's spirit was quick to detect the trend of his thoughts.

'Don't look so solemn, Mr. Merivale,' she said, in a low voice. 'I assure you nobody takes my cousin seriously. She is all froth. If she had been at all serious, I would not have ventured to bring her here; but the only other alternative was to stop away myself.'

'I am glad you did not do that,' he responded quickly. 'We do not forget that this is your last Sunday among us.'

'But she has promised to come and see me at Camberwell,' put in Manny quickly.

Janet nodded and smiled, and patted the thin hand which hung listlessly by the side of the couch. Manny's face was flushed with excitement at the moment.

'Where's Adelaide, daddy? Isn't she going to have any tea?'

## The Fighting Line

‘ Presently, old chap. She’ll come and help you, Mrs. Macbride. Ah, here she comes.’

Adelaide had awakened to the fact that she might make herself useful. She now appeared with a white apron tied decorously over her bright purple frock, and her hat, with the precious feathers, had been removed. She took the tea-pot from the hand of Mrs. Macbride, and disappeared with it, having taken in the whole group on the little lawn. The thing which disquieted her most was the sight of Manny’s father bending towards the beautiful vision in the basket-chair, as if she held him in thrall.

‘ Your good friend Mrs. Mac—Macbride—ah, how difficult are your Scotch names ! ’ she said prettily—‘ she thinks I am a heathen, Mr. Freeman, and now you imagine me something worse. But I do assure you I have my serious moments, when I can fit them in ; and Janet Romaine will tell you that I have a little table in my drawing-room covered with prayer-books. It stands behind the screen in the alcove, and when I feel serious, or have been very naughty, I go in there ; I suppose as other people go to church. I’ve given up going to church, it’s a hollow mockery ; anyhow, they’re always asking one for money. Don’t you think religion, if there is any, ought to be free ? ’

‘ It was free certainly on the shores of Galilee,’ observed Freeman quietly.

‘ Why, of course it was ! How beautifully you

## A New Sensation

put it. I must remember your words. Do you hear, Janet? Mr. Freeman quite approves of my reasons for not going to church; he agrees with me that religion ought to be free. I must tell Aunt Elizabeth. How the Bishop would stare, too! I say, Mr. Freeman, will you come to lunch with me one day, to meet the Bishop, and confute his arguments? I am sure you could.'

'I am afraid not, Lady Beltravers. That would not be much in my line of thing. If the Bishop meets me on my own platform—the people's platform—I shall be happy to break a lance with him.'

'Do you mean in Hyde Park, on the top of a cart or something? How awfully funny that would be. Can you imagine the Bishop, Janet, and Aunt Elizabeth's horror? Well, come to tea one afternoon, and I'll ask him to drop in; 88, Curzon Street, this day fortnight, that's the week after Ascot; don't forget now.'

Freeman did not promise, neither, however, did he forget.

'Now, Mr. Merivale, I want to talk to you; I see you are all friends here. Do you think my cousin ought to be down here when she's an only daughter, and her parents adore her? I don't know anything about duty myself, and never do it, but whatever it is makes her stop here, when she ought to be in the Cromwell Road, is wrong. That's how I look at it.'

## The Fighting Line

'Miss Romaine has been very happy here,' said Mrs. Macbride, 'and you should see her among the children. She can do anything with them.'

'Dear woman, that isn't the point. There are other claims on her,' observed Lady Beltravers sweetly. 'There is a kind of fascination about the East End, I admit,' she added, with a glance towards Freeman, which, however, he did not see. 'We are all after the same thing, a new sensation. Well, I've had one this afternoon, and I think I'll go now, dear people, if you don't mind. Just see whether my brougham's at the gate, will you?'

She looked at Freeman, expecting to be obeyed, and he went, but not readily. He was angry, and resented the woman's imperious way, not knowing how little significance to attach to it. She would have ordered the Bishop precisely in the same way. Freeman, however, imagined that she wished to show the superiority of her position. Yet there was a curious fascination about her. As they walked together down the path, she turned to him with an adorable smile.

'If you were a bishop, you would offer your arm.'

'I am only a plain working-man, madam, and I will not presume.'

'I should not think it presumption, I should admire it,' she answered. But he did not take the hint, he stood by rigidly at the carriage door, not making the slightest movement to help her, though

## A New Sensation

he did shut the carriage door when she had seated herself.

'You are rude, but I will forgive you,' she said, with a little shrug. 'Come to Curzon Street on Sunday week, and I will teach you better manners.'

'Good-bye, Lady Beltravers.'

'Oh, good-bye. Won't you shake hands even? I suppose it's part of your Socialist creed,' she said gaily. 'I'm awfully interested; I love strength and courage, I assure you, and you have both. You will come, won't you?'

'I can't promise, Lady Beltravers, I may be otherwise engaged.'

'You may, of course, so may I, but we shan't be. You are going to come. Would you mind telling the chauffeur that I want to be dropped at Down House, Piccadilly, and that he is to drive as fast as he dare, for I am late already; so much for the fascination of the Isle of Dogs. What is the name of your solemn-faced friend, again?'

'You mean Merivale?'

'Oh, Merivale; yes, it's a good name, and he looks different from the rest, not so indigenous to the soil.'

She was daringly impertinent on purpose, she wanted to see the gleam in Freeman's eyes. But they did not meet hers.

'Good-afternoon,' she said, leaning out of the window. 'Do say good-bye. Can't I drive you

## The Fighting Line

anywhere ? I thought I heard you were to speak in Hyde Park this afternoon.'

' So I am.'

' And I am going to Piccadilly. Do let me take you. Come ? '

' Thank you, I will come, Lady Beltravers ; if you will kindly excuse me, I will step back and tell them.'

She nodded, and sat back in the carriage, a little smile playing about her mouth. It was very warm, and the sun was delicious. She pulled the cord, and told the chauffeur to open the carriage.

Freeman stepped back with a curious expression on his face, which Janet observed and fancied she understood.

' I shall go now,' he said bluntly. ' I am due at the Park at five.'

' And I am to stop here, dad ? '

' Yes, if Uncle George will allow you, till I come back. The girl will look after him while I am gone, and I will hurry back.'

He raised his cap to Janet and to Mrs. Macbride. From where she sat the latter could just catch a glimpse of a small bit of the road.

' He's gone in Lady Beltravers' motor,' she said, a little aghast.

Janet jumped up and took a step forward just in time to see the brougham turn, and to catch the flutter of Judy's pink parasol in the gentle wind. Freeman sat by her side.

## CHAPTER X

### 'GOOD-BYE'

THEY looked a little helplessly at one another, then the eyes of Mrs. Macbride met Janet's, and they laughed.

'I should not have expected it,' said Janet. 'Doubtless Mr. Freeman is interested in the new type.'

'It's not so very new to us here since the Labour men went into Parliament,' she answered. 'Mr. Freeman sometimes goes to Mrs. Blake's on Sunday afternoon. She often has the West End ladies at Kent Terrace.'

'Your cousin, I think you said?' observed Merivale, who had been oddly silent for the last half-hour.

Janet nodded.

'Her mother and mine were sisters, but Judy has been out in the world on her own account a long time. She was educated at a convent school at Bruges; her father was a Roman Catholic.'

'She will be one also, then?'

'I suppose so, if anything, but Judy is not devout.'

## The Fighting Line

Aren't you having a good time, sonny?' she asked Manny, struck by the expression of the boy's face.

'Yes, but I don't want dad to go off like that. Where's Adelaide?'

'I'll see about her; I dare say she's washing up,' said Merivale.

'Let me see,' cried Janet, jumping up as if it were a relief for the moment to get away. Judy had left an atmosphere behind; she had distinctly jarred upon the harmony of the afternoon.

Janet had never been inside the little house by the river's brim. Merivale watched the flutter of her white frock against the faded green lintel, and gave his shoulders a little shrug. The poverty of the interior did not trouble him.

Mrs. Macbride leaned forward a little and looked with her keen, quiet eyes at Merivale where he sat on the end of Manny's couch.

'In whatever guise they come, friend,' she said, in a low voice, 'they break up the serenity. It is a mistake. The elements will never fuse. We ought to be glad she's going back.'

'No, you are right, they never fuse. I am surprised at Freeman; the incongruity can't have struck him. She'll stop the motor on the outside of the crowd, and they'll see him.'

'Oh, they'll think it all right. It is the fashion for ladies to be interested in the movement now.'

Merivale's lip curled.

## ‘ Good-bye ’

‘ Freeman ought to be above it,’ he said, careless of the hurt expression in the eyes of the little lad. They never considered Manny; somehow it was the custom to discuss all and every question beside him, consequently Manny had a strange medley of opinions within his mind—a curious mingling of the infantile and the antique. All the doctrines of Socialism he had by heart; he could have strung their shibboleths together by the hour. Sometimes his father would rehearse his speeches to him in the little Camberwell room, and it was always an appreciative audience. Manny knew that property and money were unequally divided, that one-half had too much, the other not enough; and that it was the toiling half, the earning half, that suffered deprivation. And even he looked for the year of jubilee which was to witness the downfall of capital and power, and its transfer to the people whose heritage it was. But individual examples of wealth known to Manny, being very few, did not count. Some rich people had been kind to him, and many poor ones. The jubilee, when it came, would put everything right, and there would be no more cruelty or unkindness in the whole world. Manny also believed that his father laboured for this end, and would live to compass it. He understood that while the fight went on, there must be hardships, but he hoped and looked confidently for the day of victory.

## The Fighting Line

It was easy to find Adelaide within. In the regions behind, she was washing up, to the tune of 'Hold the Fort.' Adelaide was a revivalist, and looked for the year of jubilee in a different quarter. She had a magnificent voice, sometimes heard to advantage at open-air meetings. Janet paused in the middle of the kitchen floor, where she could see her and listen to the clear strains of her voice. Adelaide interested her, and she took a keener survey than usual of her looks, attitude, and expression. All were striking. Adelaide was a Londoner born, and she bore the image on her face. Also she had that half-defiant bearing which comes of a long battle with circumstances, her figure adjusted itself naturally, as it were, to the fighting line. The badly fitting frock of cheap material, which so detracted from her looks, was in itself a protest. Contrasted with the pure white of Janet's costume—donned only on Sundays, however, in the Barking Road—it seemed the triumph of ignorance against that nice sense of the fitness of things, which is the first essential of the simple life. Adelaide turned with the tea-tray, and saw Miss Romaine standing. Instantly the singing ceased, and she smiled cheerfully.

'“ 'Old the Fort,” miss; it's a cheery tune, it 'elps a gel along.'

'I am sure of it. What a lovely voice you have!'

'I likes to sing, miss. I wish I could do uvver



IN THE REGIONS BEHIND, SHE WAS WASHING UP TO THE TUNE OF  
'HOLD THE FORT!'



## ‘ Good-bye ’

things as heasy. Now, where do them things go, I wonder ? ’

‘ Never mind now, leave them on the tray, and come out,’ said Janet gently. ‘ Manny wants you.’

‘ Not to-day, surely, ’e’s got ’is favver, and all you folks.’

‘ His father has just gone.’

‘ In the motor-’bus ? ’ inquired Adelaide, going straight as an arrow to the mark.

Janet nodded.

‘ In Lady Beltravers’ carriage,’ she corrected.

‘ Is that ’er nime ? I couldn’t say it, an’ I’m not a-goin’ ter try. A real swell, not like you, miss, that on’y pretends.’

Janet laughed, in no way offended.

‘ I brought a book for Manny. Come out and read a bit to him, while we talk. It isn’t good for him to hear so much grown-up talk.’

Adelaide opened her eyes.

‘ It don’t ’urt ’im, ’e knows a lot more than ’nybody’d think, that kid does. I on’y wish I knew arf as much.’

‘ You can learn a little every day. I will lend you books if you like.’

Adelaide’s eyes filled with a sudden rush.

‘ Miss, I carn’t read, not a word.’

‘ No, Adelaide ? Why, I thought everybody could read now.’

Adelaide shook her head.

## The Fighting Line

' Bin in Skimminses sinst I was seven ; couldn't read afore that. She took good care I didn't learn sinst.'

Janet looked shocked.

' I wonder Mr. Freeman has not taught you.'

Adelaide coloured painfully.

' Miss, 'e don' know, nor Manny. I pretends I never 'ave the time to read. Promise you won't tell 'im—Mister Freeman, I mean.'

Janet promised, though quite at a loss to understand the motive prompting the reticence of Adelaide.

' Of course I promise, but I'll do more. I'll teach you if you like.'

' Oh, miss, will you ? '

Her face became glorified ; its sweetness long remained in the memory of Janet Romaine, a sweetness touched with pathos.

Janet nodded reassuringly. ' I am leaving Poplar next week ; no, this week, on Wednesday, and going back to my home in London. You get a night out, I suppose ? '

' No, bit I kin tike one. Skimmins dursn't say a word.'

' Is Skimmins your master, or what ? '

' The missus, but Skimmins is good enuff fer 'er. i on'y stops becos of them.'

She jerked her thumb in the direction of the garden, and nodded significantly.

' An' Skimmins knows it, she dursn't say a word.

## ‘ Good-bye ’

I goes me own w’y. I ain’t fergive ’er becos of the readin’, an’ she knows it, miss; everythink grows ’arder as yer grows up. Nothink don’ matter to kids; that’s w’y I don’ want Manny to grow hup.’

Janet put out her kind hand and patted Adelaide’s arm. She descried great possibilities here, and wondered that Freeman, in his eagerness to redress the wrongs of the world, should have passed by the need under his own roof.

‘ Never mind, Adelaide. You and I can be friends, and I will help you all I can. We shall meet after I get back to London. I know Mr. Freeman’s address, and I will write. Now come out to Manny.’

Adelaide looked unutterable things. She wanted to kiss the kind hand lying on her arm, but did not dare. Instead she laughed an awkward laugh.

‘ I shan’t know meself wiv me grand friends. It’ll mike Skimmins sit hup.’

She pushed out in front of Janet, unaware that it was a little breach of courtesy. Janet thought of the long training that was required, the generations of observance to bring courtesy to its full fruit; she also wondered whether it might not be better to leave Adelaide in the rough. To awaken potentialities is always dangerous, unless one is prepared to face the full responsibility. But she could see that something had already stirred the soul of Adelaide. When she followed her to the garden, she found that Macbride had arrived, and

## The Fighting Line

that he and Merivale had moved Manny's couch lower down the garden to the very edge of the river, where they stood talking together. She nodded to Macbride, and sat down by his wife.

'That poor girl can't read,' she said quickly. 'It is a shame. There are so few now who suffer such deprivation.'

'She's worth ten of them who can read,' answered Mrs. Macbride with conviction. 'Freeman does not know how much he owes to Adelaide. I often wonder why he doesn't see it. She's everything to the boy, and makes all the home they know. He takes it all for granted, as many of them do.'

'You believe in him, however?'

'You mean, do I think him sincere?'

'Yes.'

'Of course he is, but he wants a little more light.'

Adelaide, armed with a large picture-book, took her place by Manny, and the two men came back to the place where the tea-table had been spread.

'I am sorry to take my wife away, Miss Romaine, but there is some one waiting at home who has come a long way to see her to-day,' said Macbride.

'That's why I did not turn up at tea-time.'

'It's all right, I shall be going soon,' said Janet quietly.

But a look in Merivale's eyes deterred her, and she sat down again after she had said good-bye to the Macbrides, promising to come and see them

## ‘ Good-bye ’

at their own house before she left the Barking Road. Merivale walked with them to the gate, and when he came back, Janet asked where his sister was. He looked put out at the question.

‘ She did not tell me. She goes her own way,’ he replied, a trifle reservedly.

‘ I thought I saw her as I came along in the brougham. She had a young man with her.’

‘ Yes,’ he answered dully, ‘ she has a young man.’

‘ I know about him—we all know about him at the Settlement. He is quite impossible, Mr. Merivale. Can’t you do anything?’

‘ My sister is twenty-five, and I can’t do anything.’

‘ But you don’t like it, it makes you miserable.’

‘ Naturally, but she being twenty-five, as I said, I can do nothing.’

‘ Can’t Mrs. Mac help?’

‘ She has tried.’

‘ Could I help?’

He shook his head.

‘ You might try, but—but I am afraid it would have little effect.’

‘ I should speak to him,’ she answered clearly.

‘ Not to her.’

He shook his head with considerable energy.

‘ I hope you won’t do that. He would not understand how to behave to a lady like you. Promise me you will not try the experiment.’

‘ I should not be at all afraid,’ she answered

## The Fighting Line

brightly. 'Will you tell me what you think about my cousin?'

'I would rather not pass an opinion. I have neither the right nor the knowledge to do so.'

She laughed.

'How can I redeem you from this intense seriousness? Life is a big thing, but it need not sap the very springs of one's being,' she said gaily. 'I wanted to be cheered here to-day. I came for the purpose, and I feel very depressed, I assure you. Everybody seems out of temper or spirit, I don't know which. Even Manny is affected.'

'How could we cheer you, feeling as we do?'

'Next Sunday I shall be at home in the Cromwell Road. Shall we ever see you, I wonder?'

'No, never.'

'But why? You would like my father, even if you did not find much to say to my mother. You saw him at Lambeth the other night. He is very human.'

'I could believe that, but I will not come, thank you very much.'

'You really ought, for the purpose of correcting certain wrong impressions.'

He did not ask whose, or what impressions she meant, and after a moment she, disappointed and a little heart-sore perhaps, rose to go. She walked across the short grass to Manny's side, and bent to kiss him.

## ‘ Good-bye ’

‘ Good-bye, darling. I’m coming to see you, and Adelaide, and Robinson ; we’re going to have some fine times together, after next week.’

She nodded to Adelaide and returned to Merivale, who now stood bareheaded to receive her. They walked together down the narrow path, and Adelaide watched them with something in her eyes which spoke volumes.

‘ This is to be good-bye for good, then ? ’ he said, when she had passed out of the wicket-gate and shut it, and turned to face him where he stood.

“ I suppose so. There is no other way.’

‘ And you will forget all about me here in the dear Isle of Dogs. The trouble is that I shall not be able to forget you.’

‘ Good-bye, friend, remember that somewhere the sun shines occasionally, though I turn to it only the face of gloom.’

She offered her hand ; Merivale scarcely touched it. His face was quite pale, and his eyes had unutterable depths. He did not speak a word. She turned away, and when she had left the ragged hedge at the corner, she took out her handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

Merivale walked back to the deserted lawn, sick at heart. The day upon which he had builded his hopes had come and gone, and what was left ? Nothing but the futility of things, the dull ache, the grey to-morrow which would never have an end.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE MOTOR DRIVE

LADY BELTRAVERS had had a dull day, and the prospect of the long ride back to town with a 'new man,' as she expressed it later, gave a fillip to her imagination. It was a triumph to have captured a real Socialist, and she meant to make him talk. He sat bolt upright among the drab cushions, his arms folded across his chest like a groom.

'You look as if you wanted to kill somebody, probably me. You can if you like,' she said airily. 'I don't have much to live for at the present moment, I assure you. You don't like riding in the lap of luxury?'

'You are right, I don't like it. I ought not to have come. I don't know why I did. Will you stop the brougham and let me down?'

'No,' she replied calmly, 'I won't do any such thing. Why should I? You came of your own free will. Besides, it's very pleasant. It's because you really like it you think you ought to get down.'

He smiled a little grimly. When he still kept silent, she rattled on:

## The Motor Drive

'I was reading somewhere in a magazine the other day—oh! the *Nineteenth Century*; it was an article called "The Humours of the Poor." Have you seen it?'

'No.'

'Well, don't snap my head off. It was an attempt to prove that all the writers who have tried to describe East End life— And what a deluge we have had lately! If we could get such a boom of popularity up West, how we should bound up in our own estimation. Well, what was I saying?—oh, yes, that they had all failed by drawing pictures of unrelieved gloom. He gave weird examples of the humour of the East End, and said it was the only place where people knew how to laugh. He can't have paid a visit to the Isle of Dogs.'

'You think us dull, then? Naturally you would.'

'Oh, dull isn't the word, that's too commonplace. You are tragic, all of you, even the girl in the feathers strikes the tragic note. What has happened to your friend Merivale? He looks as if he had committed all the crimes in the Decalogue, or wanted to. What's the matter with him?'

'A common complaint; he's the round peg in the square hole.'

'Explain yourself.'

'Well, he ought to be in a different sphere.'

'Ought he; then why isn't he?'

## The Fighting Line

Freeman could not find an answer for the moment. She was very sharp and shrewd ; he could not have imagined so much quickness hidden under the little bonnet of pink roses, and the golden hair beneath.

‘ I’ll tell you a story,’ she said demurely. ‘ I was once in a drawing-room where the delinquencies of husbands were being discussed. Oh, yes, we do discuss them sometimes ; I suppose such enormity is unknown where you come from ? They take their knocks lying down. Most of us contributed something, I believe, except one woman. She was rather pretty, with that composed, demure air which is so deceiving. It is mostly cats that acquire it. Somebody asked for her opinion. She got up, I can see her now ; she had a dove-grey frock on—that species of cat always wears that species of frock. She looked round on us sweetly and said, “ I’ve never had a husband myself, but I can see that most women get the husband they deserve.” ’

Freeman threw himself back and laughed loudly—such a big laugh that those on the pavement heard it, and looked amusedly at the couple in the carriage.

Judy smiled mischievously.

‘ I’m glad you can laugh, but you haven’t applied the moral. If your friend is the round peg in the square hole, why doesn’t he get out of it ? Probably he has the berth he deserves, eh ? ’

## The Motor Drive

'No. There are circumstances one cannot control.'

'Why, that isn't Socialistic doctrine! I thought you took account of no circumstances, that you wanted everything, and meant to have it by brute force.'

Freeman turned to her interestedly. She was very pretty. He had never in his whole life seen a creature so dainty, so alluring.

'Your class misrepresents mine, Lady Beltravers.'

'Possibly, just as yours misrepresents mine. We all lie about one another,' she added cheerfully.

'So what does anything matter?'

'Then don't let us discuss it. Look at the sunset over there on the Palace gardens.'

'How wicked of it to shine there,' she said with gentle sarcasm, glancing across the green fringe of trees before the Bishop's palace. 'Because, of course, there ought not to be any bishops, or any palaces. Or am I misinformed? Do you allow bishops?'

Again Freeman laughed.

'I really wish you would explain Socialism to me, though,' she said seriously. 'I assure you it is an every-day subject of conversation at all our dinner-tables, and I should rather like to score as an authority.'

'I would much rather not be the source of your information, Lady Beltravers. The subject would not in the least interest you.'

## The Fighting Line

'But it does interest me, and so do you,' she replied gaily. 'I suppose you are all rude and ungracious; it's part of the creed.'

'I am sorry if I have been rude or ungracious; it was far enough from my thoughts.'

'Oh, don't look tragic, the laugh becomes you much better! If you only knew how it improved your looks, you'd cultivate it. What are you going to talk about to-day in the park? I should love to stop and listen, only I am due at Down House at five, and I must get there; it's a relative! Do you have any relatives? They are surely given us for our sins.'

'No, I have no relatives. But Miss Romaine is your cousin, isn't she?'

'Yes, Jen doesn't count, she's a good sort, and even her new fad hasn't spoiled her.'

'No, it has only spoiled those she's been among,' muttered Freeman under his breath.

'I hear you, and I know what you mean. But your friend Merivale is a fool. Even if my cousin had any leanings in his direction, they would be promptly nipped in the bud. Her mother has views for her. She never would have been allowed down East, except for her father. He's an old sheep. I never can understand, looking at him, and hearing Aunt Elizabeth drum-major him, how he won the V.C.'

Freeman made no reply. He felt glad, seeing the

## The Motor Drive

towers of Westminster ahead, that his experience would soon be at an end. He resolved not to repeat it.

‘Do you know Lady Vansittart, who goes so much to the Blakes’? She’s taken up the Labour members, and is running them for all she’s worth.’

‘I’ve seen her at Blake’s house, of course, and heard her at his meetings,’ he replied guardedly.

‘You don’t approve of her?’

‘I neither approve nor disapprove. I don’t like the woman,’ he answered frankly.

She laughed and clapped her hands.

‘I should like Violet to hear you; just in that tone. It would do her good. But you haven’t told me what you are going to speak about in Hyde Park.’

‘I have nothing to say. I only promised to support a man who has.’

‘I can’t get anything out of you; even my ignorance does not appeal to you,’ she said plaintively. ‘Now, I wonder what would appeal. I must ask Violet.’

‘She has made a good many mistakes,’ he said, rather off guard, and a quick interest leaped in the blue depth of Judy’s eyes.

‘I do wish you’d come to tea with me next Sunday—no, the next again. I’ll ask Violet and Franklin Agar, and you can break a lance with either of them. I assure you it’s your duty to

## The Fighting Line

come to close quarters with the enemy and study them. It would be an immense help to you.'

'Does Franklin Agar visit at your house?'

'Not often, I confess. He does me the honour to disapprove of me in generous measure. He's on my husband's side. But I can get him to come, just as I shall get you, I hope. It's my only *forte*, getting the things I want.'

'You are more fortunate than the majority of your fellow-beings,' he said, with the first touch of bitterness she had seen in him.

'It requires a little diplomacy, that's all. Unless a woman is a diplomatist, she's bound to be a failure. Never demand anything. Why 'twas I who engineered my aunt, Lady Romaine, so that she allowed Janet to go to the Barking Road, though you wouldn't give me credit for it. I put it to her like this—quite commonplace, of course, but still it appealed; I pointed out to her that to let her go was the only cure.'

'And you think she is cured?'

Judy shrugged her shoulders. 'Well, frankly, I don't know. I haven't seen enough of her, but judging from what I saw in that queer place we were at this afternoon, I should say she isn't.'

'Miss Romaine has got the cry of the East into her blood,' said Freeman.

'What an assertion! If Aunt Elizabeth were to hear it she would be speechless. I don't believe

## The Motor Drive

it. Do you know that she was one of the brightest lights of last season, that every one admired her ; she could have married almost anybody. She isn't so very beautiful, it's her way, her personality ; it simply bowls people over. If she had been my girl, I would have shut her up on bread and water ; but let her go to the East ? No, never !'

' But Miss Romaine is strong enough to choose a path for herself.'

' I dare say, and you would approve of it ! Have you dismissed parents as well as everything else from the scheme of things ? Is it to be general anarchy ? What about your own little boy ?'

' Unfortunately for him, he will never have a chance. He will never be in the fighting line.'

' Have you done everything for him that can be done ?'

' He has been to many doctors and hospitals, but nothing has been done.'

' Ah !' Her face became more tender, a curious softness dwelt in her eyes. ' I am glad I have never had any children. They are one's undoing, I can see. When one embarks on a career, not of crime, but of enjoyment, there isn't any room for children. Besides, there are plenty, too many of them in the world already. Impecunious persons like myself are doing their best duty to the State, when they don't have them. You look shocked ; I thought nothing could shock a Socialist. Here

## The Fighting Line

we are ! Do you know that I have travelled all over the world, and I have never seen anything more beautiful than these buildings ? Architecturally they may be all wrong, artistically they are perpetual joy to the eye. Don't you admire them ? '

' Yes,' answered Freeman, but his tone was half-hearted.

' They represent so much money, which I suppose you think ought to be in the people's pockets. What a strange London it will be when you get it into your clutches ! Why don't you write an article for the *Nineteenth Century*, entitled " The London of the Future, the People's London," with a very big " P " ? You look now as if you could make it lurid. I'm sure I've done my best to entertain you. Haven't you had a very pleasant ride ? '

' Too pleasant, Lady Beltravers.'

' Can anything be too pleasant ? ' she asked, arching her straight brows. ' You should take a leaf out of my book. We only live once, let's get as much out of life as we can. I get down at the next turning. If you like, the motor can take you to the Marble Arch.'

' Oh, no, thank you, Lady Beltravers, that would be trespassing too far.'

' Not at all, he has to wait for me ; he might as well be usefully employed.'

## The Motor Drive

But Freeman shook his head. He got out the moment the car stopped before the portico of Down House, and stood on the kerb until she had alighted.

She offered her hand with a charming smile.

'I shall expect you this day fortnight at four o'clock. Don't you forget it.'

This time he did not refuse the hand, or say he would not come.

## CHAPTER XII

### A MORNING CALL

**M**ONDAY was washing-day at the little house behind the ragged hedge. Polly was very tired next morning after a long afternoon in the country, but she did not indulge herself. When the horn blew at six o'clock she stole downstairs to set about lighting the copper fire. Merivale had already gone, without his cup of tea. Polly moved about listlessly, rather pale and heavy-eyed. She had a good deal on her mind. She had already proved that hard work is the best panacea for heavy thought, and by the time the copper boiled, and she had plunged her shapely arms into the soapsuds, she felt better. It was her custom to sing at her work, but this morning she did not sing, though she worked with a will, and when her brother returned for breakfast at nine, he was surprised to see a line full of newly washed clothes flapping in the sun.

'You've surely put your best foot foremost this morning, Polly,' he said pleasantly. 'When did you get back last night?'

## A Morning Call

' Back at ten, and I heard you at eleven. Where were you ? '

' Helped Freeman to get the boy home, and went to hear Mrs. Besant at Queen's Hall after that.'

' How did the tea-party go off ? Did they all come ? '

' Yes, two we did not expect.'

' Who were they ? '

' Lady Beltravers, a cousin of Miss Romaine, and Adelaide from Camberwell.'

Polly laughed as she served the bacon.

' Mustard and cress,' she said quietly. ' Was there enough to eat ? '

' Plenty. They all asked for you, Polly.'

' Very kind of 'em, I'm sure. I wasn't askin' for them.'

' I wanted to show you a letter, Polly, I've had this morning—Wynyard Larmer, from India.'

' The boss—well, what does e' want ? '

' He's coming home, and says he's going to take up business seriously.'

' Oh, what for ? '

' I don't know, but that's his news. It may make a big difference to me, Polly ; in fact, if he's the same old card, I couldn't stop.'

' And where would you go ? ' she inquired, but without any live interest.

' Ah, that's a different story. It'll be time enough to decide when he comes. Wouldn't you like a

## The Fighting Line

change from the Isle of Dogs—to go into the country, perhaps ? ’

‘ But there ain’t any work in the country. I was there yesterday, out Hadleigh way. P’r’aps you’re thinkin’ of a farm. Lor,’ I think I see you at it ? ’

‘ A farm would do, Polly, though I confess I hadn’t thought of that. I don’t think it was intended that human creatures should live in places like this.’

‘ Might be wuss,’ replied Polly, with her mouth full of bacon. ‘ I couldn’t stick the country, meself. It’s all rite fer Sundays, and Bank ’Olidays, but fer the uvver d’ys, no thank yer. Gimme the Barkin’ Road.’

Merivale looked at her intently a moment, noting her tired eyes and her listless look ; but he did not ask any questions about the day before. To ask questions when there is no community of interest is futile. Besides, he knew that Polly did not always speak the truth. He had a curious yearning over her that day—the feeling that she was approaching a crisis in her life, and that she needed guiding ; but never had he felt himself less competent to be that guide.

‘ I suppose you were out all these hours with Glazebrook ? ’ he remarked drily.

‘ I s’pose I was ; ’tain’t any of your business. I don’t interfere with you an’ yer folks,’ she

## A Morning Cail

answered sullenly. 'But I don't like 'em any better than yer like mine. We're on different sides of the road, Geo, that's all.'

It was a big all, he might have said, but refrained.

Polly gulped down her last mouthful of tea, and went back to the scullery and the wash-tub, closing the communicating door. Merivale took a quiet pipe on the way back to work, pondering on Polly's expression, which exactly described their attitude and relation to one another. How is it possible that those of one blood can drift so far apart? It is one of the little tragedies of life, out of which great issues arise.

Polly finished her second copper of clothes before she cleared up the kitchen. She had just begun to sweep the floor when a shadow crossed the window, and somebody knocked at the front door. She pushed a stray wisp of hair back behind her ear, fastened the neck of her blouse, which she had opened to relieve her in the heat of the wash-house, and crossed the little passage to the outer door. When she opened it, a woman stood there, with a baby in her arms. She was small, squat, and dark, with a somewhat sullen face; quite neatly dressed, though poorly.

'Your nime's Merivale?' she said shortly.

'Yes,' answered Polly unpromisingly. 'What d'yer want?'

## The Fighting Line

' You. I'm comin' in, miss, to 'ave a word wiv yer.'

She pushed past Polly, who had no alternative but to allow her, and follow. She took care not to let her pass into the intimacy of the kitchen, however. She set wide the sitting-room door, and motioned her in.

' Yer'll need to 'urry up, I ain't got no time to waste this mornin',' she observed, with that absence of ceremony suitable to the occasion.

' You've got to stop, my beauty, till I'm done wiv yer,' replied the other woman quietly. She closed the door after Polly entered, and stood with her back against it. ' No, Miss Polly, I'm Missis Ted Glazebrook, an' I've come 'ere this morning hall the w'y from Fulham Rents to tell yer not ter fergit it.'

Polly did not even wince, though the skin paled on her cheek. She folded her arms across her ample chest, and surveye'd her visitor and rival coolly.

' Well, an' if yer are, wot's that got ter do wiv me ? '

The little dark woman's eyes blazed, and the hand which did not hold the baby was clenched by her side.

' Yer a beauty, you are ; an' if I 'adn't the kid, I'd spoil that beauty fer ye. It's bin done fer less many a time. Yer leave my man alone, see. 'E's

## A Morning Call

mine, nothin' to brag of, but 'e's mine, that's wot I wants yer to understand.'

Polly smiled with a subtle irony, and that suggestive smile maddened the woman at the door.

'Yer oughter be ashimed of yerself, yer ought,' she cried, with a kind of quiet fury. 'A gel ter tike hup wiv a married man! I ain't 'ad a copper from im' for seven weeks, an' now 'e's livin' down 'ere, but I ain't goin' ter stand it. I told 'im I'd see yer, an' 'ere I am. Wot 'ave yer ter s'y fer yerself?'

'Nuthin',' replied Polly calmly. 'Yer hopen that door an' git. I ain't fer rubbish like yer coming in 'ere to hinsult me. I'll fetch the pollis.'

'Do,' sneered the other. 'That's wot I'm a-goin' ter do presently fer Ted; an' yer won't git hoff, my lidy, don't yer fergit it.'

'You git! I don' b'lieve a word yer s'y,' answered Polly. 'Missis Ted Glazebrook, indeed? As hif 'e'd look at the likes of you.'

The small woman shook her fist in Polly's face, stepping forward for the purpose. Polly saw her opportunity, and slipped towards the door, which she opened, and stepped into the passage.

'Git!' she said, pointing an imperious finger at the door. 'Git now, afore I fergits me Court manners an' puts yer hout.'

The woman clasped her baby a little more closely to her breast and shuffled out to the door,

## The Fighting Line

where she hurled an epithet at Polly which made her wince.

'I'll go. Ted, 'e said it warn't true, not a word of truth in it, but it wur a lie, an' 'e knew it. But I ain't done wiv yer yet, not by a long chalk. I kin bide me time, but I'll git yer, if I waits a thousand year.'

Polly closed the door, locked and bolted it. Her colour had heightened a little, and she dashed an angry tear from her eye, as she furtively watched from the kitchen window to see that the woman actually passed through the ragged hedge. She knew perfectly well that she had spoken the truth, nor did the news come with any shock. But she would tell Ted that very day that he must take ways of preventing the recurrence of such a scene. She should not be insulted in her own house, for all the Ted Glazebrooks in the world. What a fortunate thing that George had left the house! It was the sort of thing to bring him to a white heat of passion. She had once seen him angry like that, and had been cowed by it. Mrs. Ted Glazebrook left the wicket open, walked quietly down the dreary road in the lee of the high wall, till she came to the closed gates of the works. Then she rang the porter's bell.

'I wants ter see Mister Merivale,' she said quietly. 'It's himportant, young man, so yer needn't cut me nose hoff. I don't want to beg,

## A Morning Call

borrow, nor steal, yer can tell 'im, only ter speak wiv 'im fer a minnit.'

Merivale happened to come out of the office at the moment, and heard his name. He looked at the woman curiously, and would have sent her away, but something in her eyes arrested him.

'Well, my good woman, what do you want?'

'Not afore 'im,' she said, pointing to the porter. Merivale took the hint, and stepped out into the road.

'It's inconvenient to seek interviews in business hours, but what do you want?'

'It's soon said, sir,' she said, giving him the natural respect she had withheld from his sister. 'I come from yer 'ouse this minnit—bin there to see yer sister. I'm Ted Glazebrook's wife.'

Merivale gave a start. 'His wife! Then it is true he's married——?'

'True enuff, wuss luck fer me,' she said dully. 'An' this is 'is kid. I bin to yer sister an' to d'er. But she don' mean to gie hup my man. I seen it in 'er eye. P'r'aps you'll give 'er a word.'

'I certainly will. Probably she did not believe you for the moment. When she understands that he really is married, there will be no more trouble, Mrs. Glazebrook.'

The small woman smiled a wintry smile.

'No more trouble! W'y, man, it's hony the beginnin'. I see it in 'er eye, I tells ye. But if

## The Fighting Line

she don' let go my man, there'll be trouble, big trouble, that'll mike folks talk. I warned 'er, an' I warn you. I'm a peaceable woman, willin' to live decent; but there's things no woman won't stand. 'E ain't no great shikes, Ted; 'e knocks me abart, an' I ain't 'ad a bloomin' copper from 'im fer seven weeks, but 'e's my man, I tell yer, an' I mean ter 'ave 'im ter meself. That's hall, sir. Good-d'y.'

She walked away rapidly.

Merivale returned to his work sick at heart, yet conscious of a certain relief. Surely now she had proof positive what a scoundrel Glazebrook was, his sister would be cured of her folly. He looked at his watch; it was just half-past ten, the morning only begun; he could not see or speak with 'her for over three hours. He sadly felt that even this crisis would not mark the termination of his anxiety concerning Polly.

## CHAPTER XIII

### A STRANGE CODE

MRS. TED GLAZEBROOK, having so far relieved her mind, entered the nearest public-house and regaled herself with a glass of ale and a sandwich. She was not altogether penniless, having a mother comfortably off, in the ham and beef line, between Fulham and Hammersmith. She had, indeed, been living on her mother for the last three weeks, but the younger members of the family had indicated that they had had enough of her, and that it was time Ted Glazebrook was brought to book. The baby slept peacefully, and, having rested herself a bit, she proceeded by omnibus along the Barking Road until she came to the Women's Settlement. Having come so far, she meant to do the thing thoroughly, to leave no stone unturned to obtain her rights. It was a quarter-past eleven when she got down at the Settlement door, which she entered, and inquired for Miss Romaine. It happened opportunely that Janet was about to accompany the nurse to the case she had attended on the Sunday, for the purpose of bidding the patient good-bye.

## The Fighting Line

'Just go on, sister, and I'll follow, when I see what the woman wants. I don't appen to know her, do you?'

The nurse looked at her, and shook her head.

'No, I don't. I'll be an hour in Hancock Street, anyway, if you should be detained.' She nodded good-bye to Janet, who then invited Mrs. Glazebrook into the waiting-room.

'What can I do for you?' she asked kindly. 'I don't think we've met before, have we?'

'No, you don't know me, miss, but I knows you; me sister 'Liza's between-maid, at your plice.'

'Oh, are you a sister of Eliza Tidmarsh?' asked Janet pleasantly. 'She's doing very well. I saw her last Sunday week when I happened to be at home.'

'Yes'm, I know; she tol' me you'd bin there. Well, miss, I'm in trouble, I ham, an' 'Liza 'as tol' me 'ow good yer are to them in trouble.'

'Well, I try to help as far as I can. What is it?'

'Me 'usband, miss, 'e's bin an' gone an' left me sevin weeks ago, jes harfter Easter Monday, w'ich 'e spent at Heppin' Forest, 'as I 'appens to know, though not along of me.'

Janet nodded understandingly. She was getting used to sordid tales, and could hear them with considerable composure. But she never enjoyed the recital, and usually tried to stifle details.

'Tell me about him as quickly as possible,' she

## A Strange Code

said. 'For I am very busy this morning. Has he left you altogether?'

'I ain't seen 'is fice, miss, bar onst this side of Easter Monday, an' then 'e was walkin' of a Sunday wiv anuther woman on Wandsworth Common. I 'appened to be there seein' me brother's wife, an' we all saw 'im, but 'e got away wiv 'er on a homnibus afore we got at 'im.'

'And why do you come to me? Is he in this neighbourhood?'

'Yus, miss.'

'What does he do for his living? Is he working at any of the places round here?'

'No, miss, 'e don't work, 'e's a boxer, that's wot Ted is,' she said, with pride. 'An' a good 'un, too; we wus all rite an' comfortable afore he tuk up wiv this woman. I've jes bin to see 'er this mornin'.'

'Oh! so you have found out who she is?'

'Yus, through me brother's wife, wot 'as a aunt in Poplar—maybe yer knows the pub., the Rose an' Crown?—an' Ted, 'e went in there one night wiv 'er, an' they knew both 'im an' 'er. Then Jim's aunt, she writes to me, an' I comes over, see? I've giv 'er wot for this mornin', but she's a deep 'un, she is. She don't mean givin' 'im up unless she's mide. I wants yer to go an' see 'er, miss.'

'But I don't quite know what good that would

## The Fighting Line

do. Surely, if she knows he's a married man it will be enough.'

Mrs. Glazebrook laughed, but it was a melancholy sound.

'There's some as thinks it a fine think hif they can nab anuvver woman's man, she's one; but maybe she'll listen to a lidy, 'cos she counts 'erself somebody. It 'ud be better if she'd let go, fer I carn't get at Ted hunless I go inter the 'Ouse, an' let the guardians git a 'old of 'im. I don't want to do that.'

'No, of course not,' replied Janet readily enough. She was now quite familiar with the universal dread of the House exhibited by those in the direst poverty. They would starve and tighten the belt, but enter the licensed house for the relief of poverty—no. It was one of the side-lights on social questions that had impressed her most, and she intended to make use of it when she got back to leisure; she was not sure how, but Uncle Franklin must hear her experiences, and explain to her, if he could, the flaw in the system which made it so universally execrated and abhorred.

'Where does she live?' she inquired. 'I will try to see her, though I don't care much for the job.'

'Nime of Merivale, lives at a 'ouse near Larmer's Works, opposite the big wall, fice on to the river; nice little plice, might be hin the country; it's

## A Strange Code

got a real garding. Oh, she thinks she's somebody, but hi ain't done wiv 'er yet.'

Janet looked the dismay she felt.

'Why, I know her—Polly Merivale, isn't it? I will see her, of course, this very morning. If you'll leave me your address, I'll write to you.'

'Thank you, miss,' said Mrs. Glazebrook, an expression of satisfaction momentarily lighting up her dull face, as she rose to her feet. 'I'll go now; maybe I'll call on Jim's aunt, an' ast 'er if she's seen 'em lately. Mornin', miss, thank yer kindly.'

Janet permitted her to go without further parley, because the morning was slipping away, and she had a great deal yet to put into it. Her face was very grave as she drew on her cotton gloves, and made haste through the streets to the narrow, unsavoury court where the nurse had preceded her.

It was of Merivale she thought, how the story to which she had just listened would sicken and vex him. As for Polly—but she had little encouragement to think of her; she had never made the smallest headway with her. The few visits she had paid to the house on the river's brim had been resented by Polly with all her might, and she had been at no pains to hide it. Janet had tried every method to win her confidence, and had failed. But this did not alter her determination to speak quite firmly to her now; it was a desperate

## The Fighting Line

case, in which the girl might be absolutely shipwrecked and stranded before she had time to consider the consequences.

She did not linger at Hancock Street, but simply explained to nurse that she had something else to do, bade good-bye to her patients, and took the omnibus down to Poplar Station, from which it was only a short walk to her destination. She found the gate bolted, but by slipping her hand through a hole in the hedge, she was able to push the bolt back. Then she walked up to the front door. Her ring and knock brought no response. Surmising at once that Polly had seen her come, and did not wish to speak with her, she turned away from the door and walked round to the back of the house, in no way daunted or turned from her purpose. The odour of soap-suds, a little cloud of steam escaping through the scullery window, and the fresh clothes on the line, explained that it was washing-day. She gave a little cough. Polly stepped to the window and looked out.

‘I’m busy, miss,’ she said quietly, but firmly.

‘Yes, Polly, so I see ; but I won’t keep you a moment longer than I can help. I must speak to you, my dear, through this window if you won’t let me in.’

Polly, looking sullen and resentful, wiped her hands on her rough apron, cast it on the floor, and came round to the kitchen door.

## A Strange Code

'It's a fortnight's wash, miss,' she said. 'And Geo, like all men-folk, thinks it kin be got hout ov the w'y at a moment's notice. You don't know anythink abart pore folks' w'ys or doin's, miss.'

'I think I do a little; but I won't keep you. What I have to say can be said very quickly. No, I won't come in. I've just parted from Mrs. Glazebrook.'

Polly's clear white skin flushed a dusky red. Janet was glad to see the flush; it indicated that there was some feeling there, but whether of shame or anger she had yet to learn.

'Bin to you, wiv 'er cock-an'-bull story; no more Mrs. Glazebrook than hi am,' she said pertly.

'Polly, you know that she speaks the truth, and you ought to be sorry for her. Of course I am very sorry for you, because you did not know he had a wife already. He has treated you very badly.'

'No, 'e ain't, 'e never denied 'e 'ad a wife; but look at 'er, miss, she's enuff to turn any man sick, an' a 'an'some chap like Ted—no, I don't wonder at 'im, not hi.'

Janet looked rather askance. 'But, Polly,' she faltered, 'that is a terrible way to speak. Don't you know how wrong it is? Whatever she may be, she is his wife, and it is his duty to support her and be kind to her. So far, he has done neither; she is living on her mother, and they are evidently tired of her.'

## The Fighting Line

'Don't wonder,' remarked Polly easily, as she leaned against the faded lintel. 'She's a trollop, an' no mistike. Wot Ted ever saw in 'er, I carn't think.'

'If you feel like that, Polly—and it is really dreadful that you should—you won't help us to bring Ted Glazebrook to a better frame of mind.'

'I won't do nuthin'. A man can please 'isself; as a matter of fact, they hall do, rich an' poor, an' we gits wot's left. That's wot I sees heverywhere.'

This bit of philosophy, shrewdly delivered, somewhat nonplussed Janet. Polly was as quick as a needle, ready with every retort, and apparently without any moral sense. It was evidently no use to appeal to her on higher grounds. Janet took a lower stand, and proceeded to point out the personal risks she ran.

'Look here, Polly, I am obliged to speak plainly, though I don't like it, and naturally neither can you. If you persist in this intimacy with this man, it can have but one ending. He can't marry you, and he'll leave you just as he has left his own wife; but there'll be this difference, you won't have the smallest claim on him. You will go to destruction with your eyes open.'

'Well, miss, an' hif I do. I don't ast nobody to come wiv me, nor, as I said to Geo, I won't come back whinin' for 'elp. I'm not that sort. I'll live me life as I jolly-well please, wivout hinterference from hanybody.'

## A Strange Code

'Polly, that is an awful view to take of life. If that is all you are to make of it, I'm sorry for you. Won't you think it over? I'll take you away if you like, send you to the country, do anything to get you away from this man, if only you'll let yourself be guided. You don't know what you're doing, my dear; no woman can, who acts and speaks as you do. You will only realise it when it is too late.'

'Maybe, miss, but I must go back to me wash now. Don't you bother your 'ead abart me, miss; I'm not your sort, I'll never belong to no missionary band. I don't 'old wiv the glory business. As I said to Geo, I wants to live, an' I'll make life as merry as I can, though it's short. See, them's my sentiments put strite, so good d'y to you.'

But Janet still sought to detain her.

'Your brother, Polly—this will be a terrible blow to him.'

A sort of significant flash was in Polly's eyes; Janet was perfectly conscious of it, and in spite of her efforts her colour rose.

'P'raps 'e's sent you?' she asked, with a perceptible sneer.

'No, he knows nothing about it. Mrs. Glazebrook has just been to the Settlement. She has a sister in my mother's employment.'

'Well, you kin convert them, miss; I'm a houtsider, an' means to stop hout, an' don't you

## The Fighting Line

meddle wiv folks so much. It don't concern you, an' they don't thank yer, see. It's the truth, I'm tellin' ye. You fine lydies think yer can do as yer likes wiv pore folks, but just onst in a while there's one that won't be badgered—that's me, see. Good-d'y.'

'Polly, my dear, believe me, I am pleading with you as a sister might, because I want to save you from misery. I am leaving the Barking Road on Wednesday. Promise me you will come away from the temptation here. I will do the utmost I can for you. It's so terribly wrong. Another woman's husband! It ought to shock and horrify you.'

Polly laughed again, a spontaneous laugh of pure amusement.

'They're all the same, East an' West,' she observed. 'W'en I can't keep a man to mesself, I'll not go whinin' round after 'im, like 'Tilda Glazebrook. That's w'y 'e's sickened of 'er. She's mide 'erself too cheap.'

She nodded, shut the kitchen door, and walked back, humming, to her wash-tub.

Janet looked and felt dismayed. What a code of morals was this! It was useless for her, with her puny experience, to beat against the stone walls of profound ignorance and indifference.

For the first time in her six months' experience of East-End life she turned away, absolutely sick at heart.



'YOU FINE LYDIES THINK YER CAN DO AS YER LIKES WIV  
PORE FOLKS.'



## CHAPTER XIV

### IS IT OVER ?

THE carriage stopped at the door of one of the tall houses in the Cromwell Road, and Lady Elizabeth Romaine alighted.

She was a tall, handsome, imposing person, with a penetrating eye, of which her household stood in due awe. The footman gathered up the wraps, and stood aside while his mistress ascended the few steps to the open door, where the butler stood to receive her. All the appointments of a well-ordered and luxurious house were there, and Lady Elizabeth herself accorded well with them.

'Miss Romaine has arrived, my lady,' said the man.

'Arrived! When?'

'At half-past three, my lady, in a four-wheeler. I've just taken up tea to the boudoir.'

Lady Elizabeth glanced at the cards which lay on the table, took up three letters, and slowly ascended the stairs. Janet, who had seen the carriage from the upper window, stood on the landing to receive her.

## The Fighting Line

'Here I am, mother, safe and sound,' she said, with a little smile. 'How are you?'

'Quite well; but why didn't you let us know, so that you could be properly met? The carriage was doing nothing particular this afternoon. I have been merely spending a futile hour hunting after your cousin Judith.'

'Dear mother, it was all right. One does not know the exact arrival of trains from the East End, and it is not like coming up from the country,' said Janet affectionately.

'Come in while I have a good look at you. I can't believe you have actually come back.'

Janet's face was a trifle rueful as she followed her mother into the sunny room to submit to inspection. But she was wise in that she did not say she was sorry to come home.

'You might have looked worse,' admitted Lady Elizabeth. 'And your complexion has really suffered very little. One visit, or two, to Corona will put it absolutely all right. What a relief! Well, my dear, I hope your folly is over.'

Janet moved discreetly to the table and poured out a cup of tea for her mother.

'Put off that cloak; it reminds me of the illness your father had last spring, and those women we had to have in the house.'

Janet quickly threw off her cloak, and her mother, sipping her tea, could not but admire the

## Is it Over?

lines of Janet's figure, as enhanced by the clean, crisp folds of her cotton frock.

'It's astonishingly becoming,' she said drily. 'It's a pity that people of limited means like ourselves could not agree upon a uniform. What agonies of mind it would prevent!'

'I quite agree with you, mother,' said Janet, a trifle wistfully. 'And you can't think what comfortable wear it is.'

She filled up her own cup, sat down on a low seat a little away from her mother, and sipped it slowly.

'When are we going to Ruthlin?' she asked quietly.

'Not for two months at least. I am surprised that you ask the question. I hope I am not going to have any further trouble with you, Janet. There is something due to me now.'

Her mother's tone was severe. Janet could not deny that she had some reason on her side.

'Dear mother, I am sorry I have vexed you so much, but if you knew——'

'If I knew—what?'

'If you knew what it has been to me to be down there, to see life as it actually is.'

'A section of life, and a very unimportant one,' put in Lady Elizabeth quietly. 'That is where you lack, Janet, in sense of proportion.'

'It seems to me a very big section, and that is

## The Fighting Line

where the mistake is made, in considering it unimportant. Why, in West Ham alone——'

Lady Elizabeth lifted her hand with a quick gesture of impatience and protest.

'I don't want figures. I am not a Board of Guardians or a Royal Commission. You will understand, Janet, that after the sacrifice we have made, owing to your father's foolish weakness—for I never would have consented—I do not want your escapade served up to us as sauce at every meal. The episode, so far as you are concerned, is closed, and you return to the normal life. You begin by taking off that frock whenever you go upstairs. You can give the garb to Eliza Tidmarsh. I believe she has a sister in the workhouse hospital somewhere, at least, so Bingly informs me. I shall feel more comfortable when I know it is out of the house.'

Janet looked a little dismayed.

'Dear mother, do let me keep it as a memento.'

'It is unwise to keep mementoes of our follies, Janet. Believe me, they haunt us quite long enough.'

'I don't think it a folly. It has opened my eyes, and made me understand things. I shall never regret it as long as I live.'

'Well, I can't help that, I suppose; but it is over, that is the point I wish you to understand, and I hope and expect that you're now going to

## Is it Over?

take an intelligent interest in the people of your own station. We are full up, absolutely full up, between now and Goodwood. I assure you there will hardly be time to get the necessary frocks; we must go to Cecile to-morrow.'

'You still go to Cecile? Has—has she been paid?' asked Janet, with a somewhat shamed look.

'Don't ask uncomfortable questions, Janet; she has been satisfied, and I have made an appointment for to-morrow at ten. We shall have to work like galley-slaves for the next six weeks, and I expect you to give me no further trouble. Now let us talk about our own affairs. I have been hunting after Judy this afternoon to remonstrate with her; Harold has asked me to.'

'What is Judy doing now?'

'Well, she's in with some undesirables—the Van Vorsts, new people from the Transvaal; they have taken the De Voicey's house in Park Lane.'

'Oh, yes, I remember, Judy told me that.'

'When did you see Judy?'

'Last Sunday, she came to the Settlement,' answered Janet, relieved, though she could not tell why, that Judy had kept her experience that afternoon to herself.

'I must say the people are rather impossible, even their money can hardly redeem them. Judy is very thick with them. I am afraid she has

## The Fighting Line

taken money from them ; Harold is afraid of it, too, I can see, only he is too proud to mention it. He is in desperation to see you, Janet ; expecting you to work all sorts of miracles with his wife.'

'Judy doesn't take any notice of what I say, mother, she is a law to herself.'

'Don't I know it ? She is like you, she has no sense of proportion. Now she might use these people judiciously, and make them most useful to her. They will pay anything, and there are some things Judy might have done quite sensibly for herself and them ; but she runs her hobbies too hard. She's everywhere with them. On Sunday she came to Church Parade with Van Vorst himself, and, of course, people are talking. But I can't get a hold of her ; she's as elusive as a streak of lightning, and she knows I'm on her track. Of course, Harold is a bit old-fashioned, and far too serious-minded. He ought to have been a rich man like your Uncle Franklin, Janet ; his influence on the younger politicians is bad.'

'Bad, mother ? Good, you mean.'

'No, bad ; a poor man can't afford to have either views or hobbies, any more than a poor girl can afford to get out of the beaten track. If both you and Harold would remember that you have your living to get, it would be better for yourselves, and easier for your relatives.'

## Is it Over?

'I can get my own living, if necessary,' retorted Janet rather tartly. 'But I shouldn't seek it in Mayfair.'

Lady Elizabeth held up a warning finger.

'Remember your bargain, Janet; you were to get your six months in the East End, and return to us cured. I very much doubt if it has cured you. But you've had your pound of flesh, and now I'm going to have mine. Now for another item of information. Your father has had a letter from Percy Larmer, from India. He has sent in his papers, and is coming home for good; in fact, he's on his way now. And he's going into commerce.'

'Do you mean that he is going to take an interest in his own works?' she asked, and her eyes began to glow.

'Yes, it's a most extraordinary move, and we don't understand it. Your father doesn't like it, of course; he wouldn't, being what he is. He thinks that a man in the Army has nothing left to wish for, and Percy has been doing well. He ought to have been having a good time generally, with such an income at his back. Something has happened to Percy, I assure you, something quite undesirable; in fact, all our family are going to the dogs.'

'Percy is hardly our family, mother.'

'He's the son of your father's cousin, and near

## The Fighting Line

enough, and we've always taken a proper interest in him. This letter quite upset your father. It only came this morning.'

'Has Percy got into disgrace?'

'Gracious—no! He's had a good time, of course, as he was entitled to, but there's nothing of that kind. Myself, I'm afraid it's something worse; either he's had a sunstroke, or his brain is touched otherwise. His letter was a rigmarole about personal responsibility, and such-like; you never saw such a thing. I couldn't make head nor tail of it.'

'I should like to see it. Do you think father would give it me to read?'

'I shouldn't ask him. I tell you, he was very much upset by it; in fact, he's gone to the club to show it to Colonel Hamilton, and the rest. It's so foolish, too, because he has a very good manager down at Poplar, and the thing is going quite well.'

'Mother, I got to know the manager at Percy's works when I was at Poplar,' said Janet, in a low, rather diffident voice.

'Oh, you did; well, and isn't he all right? We've always heard so. When Percy was home last, he was highly satisfied.'

'Yes, he's a very good man. He didn't know I knew anything about Percy Larmer, and he talked quite freely. There are a lot of things wanting seeing to down there; there hasn't been

## Is it Over?

a penny spent on improvements for years, not since Percy's father died. He has simply drawn the income, and done nothing.'

'Well, I'm glad he had the courage to resist the improvements,' said Lady Elizabeth drily. 'It's the same at Ruthlin, if I'd listen, or let your father listen, I tell you; those under us want everything. Their whole aim is to get it. I am sure that in another hundred years we shall be serving them, and they'll be the masters. Go up and take off that frock before your father comes in. I want him to feel that you really have come back. So long as we see you in that thing, we can't be sure.'

Janet drank the remainder of her tea, picked up her cloak, and left the room. As she ascended to her own, she was conscious of a dull feeling of dread of the future. The only gleam of brightness was the news she had just heard concerning Percy Larmer. If it were true, then perhaps he would form a link between Cromwell Road and the East End. But her mother had said the episode, so far as she was concerned, was over. Two questions Janet might have asked herself without any satisfactory answer. They were these: Was it merely an episode? and, so far as she was concerned, Was it actually over?

## CHAPTER XV

### THE NIGHT BEFORE

MERIVALE'S salary as manager at Larmer's Works was £250 per annum. He had first been employed by old Gilbert Larmer, who had been an intimate friend of his father, and it had been understood between the two that Larmer should do something substantial and generous for the son of his friend. But that which had been sincerely intended had never been accomplished. Gilbert Larmer died suddenly, sitting in his office-chair at his works, and when his affairs came to be looked into it was found that he had died intestate. His only son, Percy, then serving with his regiment in Northern India, was his sole heir. He had not come home at the time of his father's death, nor in the interval of five years. He had written from time to time to Merivale, assuring him of his confidence, and promising that when he came home everything should be looked into.

But the years had passed, and everything at Larmer's remained where it was. Sheer ability and tact on Merivale's part kept the machine in

## The Night Before

working order. His personal influence over the men—of that quiet kind which it is difficult to define or tabulate—had been powerful enough to keep the thing going on steadily and without disaster. There had never been a strike at Larmer's, though there might be some discontent. But Merivale was so just and considerate, while at the same time firm, that peace was preserved. He was quite well aware that the service he rendered to the firm was worth a much larger sum than he was paid. He was also aware that many men in his place would have helped themselves and made the berth worth while. Every opportunity to do this was his, but he possessed that singular sense of fastidiousness and honour which forbade any misuse of power. He might earn little, but that little should be clean. Then, his personal expenses were very small. He had always been poor, and lived among the poor. His father had never at any time earned more than £150 a year. He had a free house, and might have saved a little money even, had his hand not been so continually in his pocket. He helped more individual cases than any of the charitable societies, and they were mostly cases outside their pale.

It was a curious life for one of genuine ability, and had he had any personal ambition, he could not have endured it. Only since he had met Janet Romaine he had begun to think that he

## The Fighting Line

had wasted his life and opportunities, that the best had gone never to come back. And when she had gone clean away from Poplar, he realised that the greyness of the years that had gone before was nothing to the blackness that seemed to settle down upon his life.

He had received a letter from Percy Larmer, written by the same mail as the one which had upset Sir Hugo Romaine, only his had been a meagre epistle, merely stating the fact that he had sent in his papers, and was coming home to devote his time to business.

It was a surprise to Merivale, of course, but he did not realise the seriousness or significance of a step which indicated some tremendous upheaval in the man's life. He did not anticipate the change with any satisfaction, and supposed it might end his connection with Larmer's. The thought of a change began to allure him for the first time, and he began to take a keen interest in colonial affairs, thinking it probable that he might go abroad.

But he did not voice his new sensations to any one, not even mentioning to Freeman that he felt disturbed and uncertain about the future. Polly concerned him a good deal just then. He had spoken to her, of course, after his interview with Ted Glazebrook's wife, but she had given him very little satisfaction. She was subdued, however, and extremely quiet, signs he did not like. He

## The Night Before

tried to reassure himself with the thought that now she knew of the insuperable barrier, she was trying to resign herself to the loss of Ted.

'How would you like to go abroad, Polly?' he asked, as they sat down at breakfast.

She started, and looked at him furtively from under her somewhat gloomy brows.

'Wot d'yer mean, Geo?' she asked, with her customary brusqueness.

'Well, I am afraid I shall not care to stop at Larmer's when the captain comes back, and we might, you and I, go abroad somewhere—South Africa, perhaps.'

She shook her head.

'Tain't likely. You'll never leave Poplar, Geo, you're glued to the place.'

He laughed at her expression.

'I'm not so sure of that, Polly. I begin to think that perhaps I have stayed in it a bit too long.'

'Could 'a' tol' yer that long ago,' she retorted.

'But now it's too late.'

He did not gainsay her, and rose to go.

'I ought to tell you I have to go up to Darlington this afternoon, Polly, and won't get back till to-morrow night.'

'Not till to-morrow night!' she repeated, looking at him strangely.

'No. You're not afraid to stop here, are you?'

## The Fighting Line

You could sleep at Mrs. Mac's, or she'll send round her maid.'

'Oh, no,' said Polly, with a mirthless laugh. 'There ain't no need. I've often slept 'ere by mesself. But don't yer want any things wiv yer?'

'I've got some here in the little black bag; no, I won't come back to dinner. The train goes from King's Cross at two, and there won't be time. I can get a bit of dinner on the train. It's the firm's business, and they'll pay the expenses.'

Polly nodded understandingly.

'You're sure you've all yer want, an' that you've not taken a night-shirt with a 'ole in it? It would just be like yer to do that. Nivver saw sech a man fer findin' hout 'oles an' trottin' 'em out.'

Merivale laughed.

'I think it's all right, and nobody will see it, anyhow,' he replied carelessly. 'Good-bye, my dear, take care of yourself till I come back. About seven to-morrow night you may look for me. I'll come down on the Scotch express.'

She walked with him out to the gate, and waved her hand to him as he disappeared through the ragged hedge. Looking back before he finally disappeared, he saw her still there, and he could have sworn there were tears on her cheeks.

He had a busy morning, but he found time to despatch a messenger with a note to Mrs. Macbride at the Gate House, telling her of his journey, and

## The Night Before

asking her to look up Polly ; and after it had been gone an hour, he remembered that she was still at Frinton-on-Sea, and that he had been asked to go down with Mac for the week-end. He sent round a note to Polly then, suggesting that she should go down to Frinton at five o'clock with Macbride, and that he would come on Sunday morning for the day, but Polly sent no reply.

Still, oddly anxious about his sister, Merivale wrote one more note, this time to Freeman, asking him, if he had no engagement, to look up Polly that evening, and see that she was all right.

Freeman received the note in time to turn up at King's Cross to see him off.

' Happened to come in for dinner as your note arrived, so I thought I'd just run in to see you. I'll go back to Polly now, and see if I can take her out somewhere, and persuade her to sleep at our place to-night. There's plenty of room, and Skimmings, to do her justice, never minds a little extra trouble.'

Merivale looked relieved.

' You understand that though it's all broken off with Glazebrook, I fear we are not out of the wood yet,' he suggested.

Freeman nodded.

' Is it all broken off, old chap ? '

' I think so. Have you any reasons for supposing otherwise ? Polly has been out very

## The Fighting Line

little. She spent the whole of last Sunday in the house, except for a little walk we took in the evening. Have you heard anything ? ’

‘ Nothing,’ admitted Freeman. ‘ No doubt I’m imagining things, but I’ve seen such tragedies of that kind, that one can’t be too careful. I’ll look her up, and we’ll have a good old talk together. We get on very well when there’s nobody else about. Surely this is a hurried journey ? There was nothing of it on Wednesday evening when we met.’

‘ Nothing ; it was only yesterday I decided to go. It’s about some of the machinery. I’ve had a second letter from Larmer. Something queer has happened to the chap, Charlie.’

As Merivale spoke, he tapped his forehead significantly.

‘ That’s what his people think,’ said Freeman. ‘ They were talking about him at Lady Beltravers’ last Sunday.’

‘ At Lady Beltravers’ ? Is that where you were last Sunday ? ’ inquired Merivale, with a curious look.

Freeman nodded, not meeting Merivale’s eyes.

‘ I went because—well, because it is good for a man to see all sides—to get his knowledge at first-hand, so to speak.’

‘ Well,’ said Merivale drily. ‘ And what’s the result ? ’

## The Night Before

'I don't know yet, I haven't seen enough.'

'Then you'll go back?'

'Probably.'

'I'm sure it's a mistake, Charlie, as far as Lady Beltravers is concerned. She'll use you mercilessly, much as they used the poet Burns a century ago; she has neither heart nor conscience.'

'She's interesting though, and clever, besides being typical of her class—the class we want to get at.'

'It doesn't seem quite fair, does it? Playing the game a bit low down, isn't it, to accept the hospitality of the enemy, for I suppose she stands in that relation to you, and then use it against them?'

Freeman only laughed.

'It's all fair in love or war, George, and I want to get at close quarters with Franklin Agar. She has promised me I shall. He was expected last Sunday, but did not turn up. Miss Romaine came, however. She was asking kindly after you.'

'Indeed!'

Merivale did not ask a single question, and at the moment the signal was given, and the train moved out.

Freeman was due at a committee-room at three o'clock. He had just time to get there, and after the meeting and a heated discussion, relative to an impending strike among the Shoreditch tailors, he proceeded to Poplar. It was about half-past five

## The Fighting Line

when he got to the little house on the river, where he found Polly sitting quietly on a bench, with an immense pile of clothing spread about her, which she seemed to be overhauling.

'Oh, good-evenin',' she said carelessly. 'Ain't it 'ot? I brought me needlework hout 'ere, ' 'pon me word, it's 'otter than inside.'

'I like it; it's right for June,' he answered, as he threw himself on the short, dry sward. 'Get me a cup of tea, won't you, Polly? I've been gassing for the last hour at committee. I saw George off, and promised I'd look you up. What can we do this evening, eh?'

She shook her head, and pointed to the pile of sewing lying on the ground beside her.

'I'm tikin' me chanst of Geo bein' away to look over things. 'E does tear 'is clothes. Seems to me 'e 'as 'is coat hoff a deal more than 'e need or ought at Larmer's.'

'He has always been one to put his hand to anything, Polly,' replied Freeman.

She rose demurely, put down her work, and went to get him his tea. He felt reassured to find her like this, and her face seemed so placid and untroubled that he blamed himself for having planted any seed of uneasiness in her brother's mind. He stayed an hour or so, trying to persuade her to come out with him, or, at least, to turn up at Camberwell later, but she declined.

## The Night Before

'Hi've set mesself a task,' she said quietly. 'An' I'm a-goin' ter do it. It's bin on me mind fer ages.'

He watched her quick fingers plying the needle to and fro, as he sipped his tea, and wondered what were her thoughts. Polly had always been a little baffling, even as a child no one could read her thoughts easily. But he left her, on the whole reassured, telling her he would look in next day, and see whether she had a mind to take a river trip with him. He was very slack himself just then, though the Shoreditch agitation promised to give him some livelier times.

## CHAPTER XVI

### UP WEST

MERIVALE got through his business satisfactorily, and joined the Scotch express at Darlington next afternoon, arriving at King's Cross a little after six. It had been very warm on the down journey, and London itself seemed to swelter in the hot June air, as he emerged from the great station. The streets were thronged ; every one that could be out of doors seemed to be there ; every tram and omnibus was full. He had an idea of riding the whole distance on the omnibus, perhaps taking Freeman on the way, but second thoughts prevailed, and turned his steps to the Underground, reflecting that it would carry him home much more quickly, if less pleasantly.

Seven was pealing from the parish church tower at Poplar when he emerged from the station and turned towards his home. He had bought a little trinket for Polly at Darlington, and the manager of the iron-works, with whom he had stayed, had presented him with a huge bunch of sweet-smelling red and pink roses of the old-fashioned sort ; these

## Up West

he had tied to his bag, and their odour seemed to encircle him. Ever after that night, Merivale disliked the smell of roses ; they always brought a painful memory back.

Polly was very fond of flowers, and had done her best to grow a few on the edge of the river, but nothing except the sturdy creeper seemed to survive. The green was cool and refreshing to the eye, however, and as Merivale came to the ragged hedge, he was filled with a sudden access of fresh admiration for the little house in which he had lived so long. It was picturesque, uncommon, more desirable than any house he had seen since he left it.

The front door was shut ; he walked round to the back, where the kitchen door usually stood wide open. But it was closed likewise, and all the blinds decorously lowered half-way down the windows. An air of quietude and repose seemed to envelop the place. Merivale suddenly felt certain that it was empty. He was quite right ; the kitchen door was locked, and when he went round to the front, he found the key in its usual hiding-place behind the ivy. He fitted it in the lock, and threw open the door. Silence met him, and that curious feeling of oppression which broods over an empty house. He threw down his bag, called his sister by name, and even wandered from room to room. The whole place was swept

## The Fighting Line

and garnished, everything in its proper niche, tidy, clean, in perfect order. He came to the kitchen at last. A meal was spread there on a clean cloth, though the fire was out; something covered up with a white napkin on the table, to which was pinned a piece of paper. He tore it off and read his sister's last message, the words she had penned with some difficulty, not being an adept with her pen, and watering them with a good many tears. Polly's heart had softened at the last; and he would never know with what a pang she had turned her back for ever on the little house by the river's brim. Thus did Polly write:

'DEAR GEORGE,—You'll guess when you see this, maybe, that I'm off. Ted and me are sailing this afternoon from Liverpool for New York. I always meant to 'ave 'im, an' 'e wants me more than anybody in the world. I'm the only one that can manage 'im. I'll make something of 'im yet, see if I don't. But anyhow, I'd rather go with 'im, than go on with the life 'ere. You've been very kind to me, Geo, since ever I was a little gel, an' I'll always remember it, but we don't sail in the same boat. And some day you'll marry, and then where would I be? I've seen it happen to other gels afore.

'There isn't anything you can do, but leave me alone now. We're going down by the boat train

## Up West

from Euston to-day, and when you get this, we'll be on the sea. I've seen to everything, your clothes and all, and I hope you'll get somebody to look after you. And don't you be too hard on me when you're thinking and speaking about me. I'm only a gel, maybe, but even a gel has a right to live. Give Charlie my love, and Manny, and Mrs. Mac. So good-bye from

'POLLY.'

Merivale let the letter flutter to the floor, and walked to the window and looked out. His face was grey in the half-light made by the drawn blind, which with a sudden jerk he pulled up to the top. He could see the river from where he stood, the river which bore the ships upon it to the sea—the sea where Polly was, three hours ahead, already far down the Irish Channel. Nothing could be done; she had gone. But he felt sick at heart, and fierce remorse shook him. He had failed to do his duty to his sister—yes, he had miserably failed. He had never understood her, nor had he taken the trouble to do so; she had been allowed to drift, and now she had gone to the inevitable shipwreck such women often make of their lives deliberately, when staring the consequences in the face.

He wandered out and about aimlessly, like one who was unable to recover from a blow. He had eaten nothing since the morning, and mechanically

## The Fighting Line

he broke off a bit of bread, drank the milk from the jug, placed ready for his tea, and then went out of the house. Its walls could not hold him ; they seemed to resound with reproaches of his neglected duty.

Poor, poor Polly, out upon the ocean with the man of her choice—the man whom she knew she could not even bind to her legally, the scoundrel that had left his wife and child to starve or to be chargeable to others, without a pang. It was an awful thing, and it was Polly, his own sister, who had done it. He remembered her as a little girl, whose beauty had often arrested attention, the pale milk and roses of her skin, set off by the red-gold of her hair. What had she made of the fatal dower ?

Merivale, usually the most self-contained of men, felt the need of personal sympathy at the moment so keenly that he went forth in haste to seek it. He turned naturally to Camberwell, but met only disappointment there. Freeman was out ; Manny gone to bed ; even the faithful Adelaide had sallied out to do some Saturday-night marketing. Mrs. Skimmings was mysterious about Freeman's outing, but Merivale could not stand the woman, and did not stop to question her. He took an omnibus outside, and rode to Piccadilly Circus on it, where he got down. It was nearly half-past eight, there was still a long evening before him ; how could he go back to the deserted house by

## Up West

the river's brim, the house that though quiet, was full of voices all insistent on the note of reproach ? He stood undecided a moment on the kerb, and finally jumped on to a Brompton Road omnibus, which immediately began to take him westward. He knew where he was going, the number in the Cromwell Road stood out clearly before him, seeming to beckon him.

The neighbourhood was entirely new to Merivale ; he had the East-Ender's ignorance of much that lay outside his own immediate area. It interested him very much. He was conscious of the freshness of the air, the feeling of space, the pleasant touch of greenness everywhere. But the stately lines of the houses, the mansions of the rich, somewhat disconcerted him, filling him at the same time with a sense of wonder. How could she, after such environment, suffer the squalor of the Barking Road, its sights and sounds and smells ? There must have been some motive within, stronger than any that had ever moved him. He found the number without difficulty, and when found, he did not hesitate. The bell was one of the old-fashioned sort that sent deep echoes resounding through the house. The door was immediately opened by a manservant, who surveyed Merivale inquiringly.

'Is Miss Romaine at home ?' asked Merivale quietly.

## The Fighting Line

'Yes,' answered the man, though a trifle reluctantly. After a brief instant of contemplation, he proceeded, 'If you will step in, sir, I will inquire whether you can see her.'

Merivale crossed the threshold, and at the moment the sound of laughter floated from some room near.

'They are at dinner, perhaps,' he said quickly.

'Yes, sir, just finished. Ladies not gone upstairs yet—this way.'

He passed slantways across the hall, and opened the library door. Merivale stepped within, and ere the door was closed, the servant asked his name. Then he was left to look about him. It was a beautiful room, albeit a little conventional in plan and arrangement. But it was the books that arrested Merivale. In all his life he had never had enough of books, and here there seemed to be thousands, arranged in orderly lines as if they were seldom disturbed. The table was littered, however, with magazines and papers in that confusion which indicates that the place is much used, a room for family purposes, where people met and talked, and spent their sociable hours. A copy of the *Fortnightly* lay open on the table, with an ivory paper-knife of huge dimensions lying across the page. Merivale glanced at it, and saw that the article was by Franklin Agar, and bore the title, 'A New London.' He would

## Up West

have lifted it, but the door was opened immediately, and Janet came in. She wore a black gown of some transparent material, which showed a shimmer of white beneath. A great bunch of La France roses was in front of the bodice, their petals lay against the whiteness of her bare neck. There was a little surprise on her face, mingled with a quite genuine pleasure, as she came forward, frankly extending her hand.

'I am very glad to see you,' she said; 'but I did not believe you would come.'

'I did not believe it myself, and I must apologise for the hour of my call,' he answered. 'I am in trouble, or I should not have been here to-night. My sister has left me.'

Janet stood aghast.

'Left you, how—not—not with that man?'

He nodded dully.

'Yes, I have brought her letter. I went back to pick it up; if you will be so kind as to read it, perhaps you will understand better.'

Janet's face flushed a little at this mark of his confidence, and she took Polly's scrawl from his hand. As she read it her eyes filled with tears.

'Poor thing,' she said softly—'poor, poor girl! As she says, Mr. Merivale, nothing can be done for her now, and you cannot reproach yourself.'

'Don't you see what she says, that we have never sailed in the same boat? She does not

## The Fighting Line

mean it as a reproach, but it is one all the same. Why was it like that? If I had taken a little pains to understand her, this need not have happened.'

Janet shook her head.

'If you had taken all the pains in the world you would never have arrived,' she said clearly. 'And I am quite sure you have nothing whatever to reproach yourself with. I have heard from Mrs. Macbride how kind and forbearing you have been with her. You must not dwell on such dark thoughts. She has put you out of her life, chosen her own path, and nothing can be done. If any opportunity should arise in the future, you can still help her, remembering that she is your sister. But she was well warned, she knew exactly what she was doing, and—and she has, with her eyes open, done a very wicked thing.' She spoke quite clearly, as was her way, facing the facts and calling things by their right names, never grudging of sympathy where it had been rightly earned. She was not one to gloss over wilful wrongdoing, and the memory of her conversation with Polly at the kitchen door that last morning she had seen her, returned with sharpness to her memory. 'I don't know whether you know I saw your sister the day the real Mrs. Glazebrook came over to Poplar from Fulham Rents? One of Mrs. Glazebrook's sisters is a between-maid here, and she knew I was at the Barking Road. After I had

## Up West

see her, I went to your house and tried to interview you—ster, to—to point out what a dreadful thing it was.’

‘I did not know you had seen her. What did she say?’

‘Frankly, I could hardly tell you. She seemed to me to have a strange code of morals. Association with such a man has lowered the whole tone. She did not seem to think anything serious had happened, and she was determined not to give up Glazebrook.’

‘But may not I be to blame for the looseness of views?’ said Merivale gloomily.

Again Janet sharply shook her head.

‘It is impossible; your whole example and life is beyond reproach. Promise me you will not brood like this. After all, though we have a certain responsibility towards our kinsfolk, we cannot live their lives for them. Right of choice at the last always lies with them, not with us. Polly has chosen disastrously for herself, and we can do nothing.’

‘You are very good to listen to me, and to talk like this. You have done me good,’ said Merivale, as he made a move towards the door.

‘You need not go yet. I should like you to meet my father. May I bring him here?’

‘Sir Hugo Romaine could not be interested in me,’ said Merivale, with a slight smile.

## The Fighting Line

'He is interested in everything. That is what makes him such a dear,' she replied brightly. 'And besides, he is specially interested at present in what is going to be Percy Larmer's future. He will only be too pleased to have a talk with you. I have told him about you. He knows most of my dear Poplar friends now, through my talk of them.'

'But you have friends dining?'

'Only one or two, and these can be left. Oh, I say, Mr. Merivale, do you know that Mr. Freeman was at my cousin Judy's last Sunday—Lady Beltravers', and that he created quite a sensation?'

Merivale's lip curled.

'He told me of it only yesterday.'

'You disapprove, I can see, by your expression.'

'I think Freeman is a fool to go there,' he replied frankly.

'I agree with you. Judy will exploit him for her own amusement, I am sorry to say, though she is my cousin. Try to tell him so, not in these words, because there is no use hurting people's feelings; but I felt sorry to see him there, the centre of that empty throng. Judy's friends are not mine, Mr. Merivale.'

'I tried to tell him a little bit of what I felt, but he did not listen,' said Merivale. 'He excused himself on the plea that he went there for the purpose of meeting Mr. Agar.'

## Up West

Janet laughed.

'He will never meet Uncle Franklin there. He disapproves of Judy, and all her ways. If he really wished to see Mr. Agar, why doesn't he call upon him at Connaught Place? He would certainly be glad to see him. He is one of the most accessible of men.'

'I can tell him, but Freeman will go his own way.'

'As we all do,' said Janet with a laugh. 'Excuse me just a moment, and I will fetch my father.'

## CHAPTER XVII

### SYMPATHY

MERIVALE was not kept waiting long. Sir Hugo Romaine returned with his daughter, and a few moments after she had made the introduction, she slipped away.

‘I am rather pleased to meet you at the present juncture, Mr. Merivale,’ said the old soldier bluntly. ‘Perhaps you can throw some light on this extraordinary decision of my nephew, Percy Larmer, to leave the Army and settle down in the East End. May I ask you what is the attraction there at the present moment—the infection which is spreading so rapidly among us up here?’

He spoke gruffly, but he had a twinkle in his eyes that reminded Merivale of his daughter.

‘I can’t say, I’m sure, what the attraction is, sir. Those of us who live there are by no means conscious of it,’ he replied, with a smile. ‘As for Mr. Larmer, I am totally in the dark. His letter to me was very meagre; in fact, it did little more than state the fact that he had left the Army, and would sail from India on the second of this month.’

## Sympathy

We are nearing the end now. He may be here any day.'

Sir Hugo listened attentively, at the same time studying Merivale's appearance with interest. He was favourably impressed.

'There used to be a clergyman down in your neighbourhood, name of Merivale. A sort of Father Dolling, wasn't he? Lived an extraordinarily self-sacrificing life. My sister used to be very interested in him; in fact, I think he was once on a visit to Ruthlin.'

'That was my father,' answered Merivale. 'He has been dead for nearly twenty years.'

'Then you may have inherited some of his devotion to the work down there. My daughter tells me how much you do for the poor of Poplar.'

Merivale looked rather shamefaced.

'Miss Romaine has exaggerated anything she may have heard, Sir Hugo,' he replied frankly. 'I am afraid I have fallen away from my father's teaching entirely. I give a man a leg-up if I see him down, as any humanitarian would, that's all.'

'Any humanitarian!' Sir Hugo seemed to ponder on the word. 'Well, we are called by a lot of different names, Mr. Merivale, and I won't quarrel with you for the use of a word I don't hear very often. I shall try to think of you as a humanitarian. Now, can you tell me, without

## The Fighting Line

any breach of confidence or loyalty (understand, I have no business to ask questions concerning Larmer's affairs; he is only distantly connected with me, but I feel curious)—are his business interests in a bad way?'

'No, sir, they are in a good way. The business is a good, solid, steady-going concern, returning a fair interest on capital,' replied Merivale. 'At the present moment, the works require a good deal of money spent on them; everything is practically worn out, for which reason I shall welcome Mr. Larmer's return. I have tried to explain what is required in my letters to him, but I don't think he has answered more than half a dozen letters of mine since he was home five years ago.'

'Yet I suppose you practically run the show, eh?'

'I do run it,' replied Merivale. 'It just happens, in Mr. Larmer's favour, that I am an honest man.'

'Or you could have helped yourself?'

'I could have taken it all, sir,' replied Merivale. 'But I am not constituted that way. There are many grievances in the place, however, and it will give me uncommon pleasure to hand them over to Mr. Larmer for his redress.'

'I can't imagine Percy redressing anything. He has been a bit of a high-flyer in his time, and

## Sympathy

this change in him I'm unable to understand. The only thing that can explain it is, that he has got religion, an expression more descriptive than elegant. I remember an instance of it in my family before. It happened with my sister Ethel, now Lady Fincastle. That was the time she made the acquaintance of your father and invited him to Ruthlin. It made a great change in her. She was one of the most fashionable women of the time, and lived hard. It practically altered her whole life, and it was quite genuine, for she's the same still. It would give her an uncommon pleasure to meet you, I am sure, for I know she always said she owed a great deal to your father. The subject did not specially interest me, and I never went into it, so I can't explain the nature of the obligation.'

'Nor can I,' replied Merivale, as he rose to go.

'Must you go already? I am glad to have made your acquaintance, and glad that Percy Larmer has the right man in the right place. You'll keep him from making an ass of himself!'

'If I stay at Poplar.'

'Oh, you'll stay. Larmer won't be able to do without you, only he must make it worth your while, understand that, eh?'

Merivale had a lighter heart as he left the house, though he could not have told why. He did not see Janet again; her father let him out himself,

## The Fighting Line

and expressed the hope that they would meet again. He had only been momentarily lifted, however, from the acuteness of his personal trouble, and when the door closed upon him it returned with unabated force. He must find Freeman, who would understand so much better than the Romaines, however kind and sympathetic they might be. He glanced back at the long, stately line of the Cromwell Road ere he took the omnibus to convey him eastward once more, and realised with a swift, sharp pang how immeasurable was the gulf. It was good for him, in a sense, to have come there in order that he might realise the gulf. And he believed honestly, as he climbed to the top of the omnibus and sat down on the front seat, that he had seen Janet Romaine for the last time. It took him a good hour to get to Camberwell; ten o'clock was ringing as he knocked at the familiar door. It was opened to him by Adelaide, who received him with a smile of welcome.

'Yus, 'e's hin, Mr. Merivale. Manny's gone to bed a good hour ago, an' 'is favver's hin the sittin'-room writin' things down out of a book. Yer knows the w'y.'

Merivale nodded, asked her casually and kindly how she was, and passed upstairs. Freeman occupied the whole of the first floor in Mrs. Skimmins' house—a big, narrow structure, offering limited accommodation on each floor. A large

## Sympathy

sitting-room, with a small bedroom adjoining, and a bathroom at the back, comprised the extent of Freeman's home. Sometimes Manny slept on the couch in the sitting-room, sometimes in the bedroom beyond. He preferred the sitting-room as a rule, because when he was awakened early, he could get Adelaide to wheel him to the window, from which he could watch the traffic of the streets. But he had had a bad day, the noise of the street, the clamour of the Saturday-evening cries as the vendors of every description of goods wheeled their barrows up and down, shouting their quality and price, had made his head ache, and his father had easily persuaded him to retire early to the inner room. He was asleep now, and the door was shut.

Freeman sat at the table surrounded by books and papers, some sheets of foolscap before him. Merivale supposed he was getting up a speech. He jumped up with evident pleasure, which was almost relief.

'I'm jolly glad to see you, George. Got home to-night, I suppose? I might have turned up at King's Cross, only the little chap has had a bad day, a suffering day. It takes it out of me as much as it does out of him.'

His tone was wrung with pain.

'Is he asleep now?' asked Merivale, in a voice of intense compassion.

## The Fighting Line

'Yes, I may have done wrong, but I'm increasing that wretched dose he gets to make him sleep. It's the only thing. Sometimes I feel as if I could give him enough to put him asleep altogether. He's so uncomplaining, so patient, I can't bear it. But what's up with you? Anything?'

'Yes, everything. Polly's gone!'

'Gone! Where?'

'To New York with Glazebrook. It's all up, Charlie, we can't do anything. There's her letter.'

He tossed it across the table, and Freeman perused it in silence.

'She's determined enough. No, as you say, George, nothing can be done. I'm sorry, old chap, but she's been well warned, and there's nothing to go back on.'

Merivale leaned his arms on the green baize of the table, and dropped his face on his hands. Here he need wear no mask, but could allow his depression of soul to have its way.

'I saw her last night,' said Freeman helplessly. 'And I could have sworn she was all right, that she'd given Glazebrook a wide berth, even in her thoughts. She was busy with household things, the picture of domestic peace. It just shows how far out we can be, any one of us, in fathoming a woman.'

'It would give me an uncommon pleasure to wring his neck,' said Merivale, with bitterness.

## Sympathy

'The best thing that could happen to poor Polly would be if the ship went down in mid-ocean.'

'It would make a dramatic ending, but it won't come off; she won't get off so easily I doubt,' said Freeman. 'Well, we must just leave her, old chap, to "dree her weird," eh? It'll make a difference to you. What will you do?'

Merivale shook his head. 'Directly Larmer comes home, I think I'll throw it up and go abroad.'

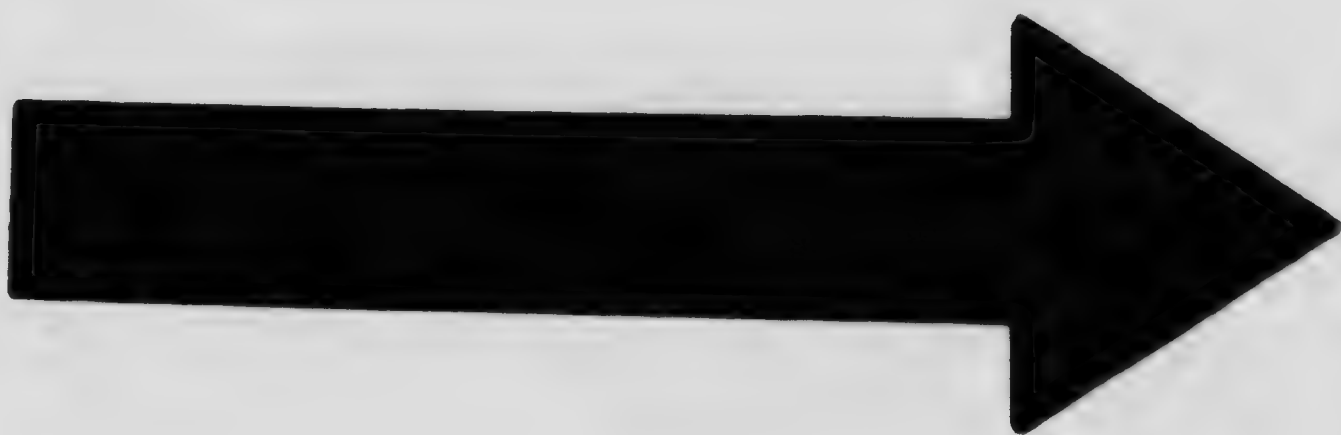
'Well, nobody could blame you, though I confess I don't know what niche you could fill out there. You're not the stuff pioneers are made of. And surely you have too much sand in you to run after Polly now. But I see that you can't live at the cottage by yourself. Couldn't you come here to Manny and me? I could square Mrs. Skimmins, I think, and Adelaide would like to look after you.'

Merivale shook his head. 'Too far from business. If you and Manny could come to Poplar, it would be better.'

Freeman pondered a moment, then spoke slowly:

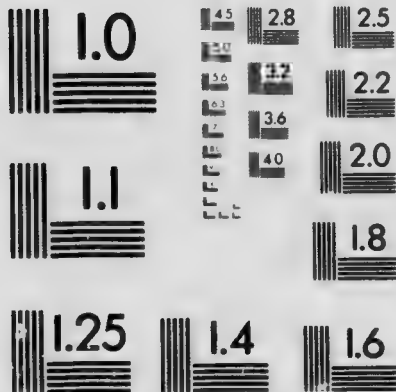
'Well, I believe that would be a good move. Manny would get out in the open there, every day. When it was fine we could just wheel him to the garden and let him watch the river. I believe it would do him good. Are you really in earnest, George?'

'I am, if you are. Nothing would please me



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## The Fighting Line

better,' answered Merivale, brightening a little. 'Then there's Adelaide. Wouldn't Adelaide be great in the Isle of Dogs?'

'Everything must depend on Adelaide. If you really think you could endure us, and we could persuade Adelaide, we might be an ideal *ménage*.'

'We should be. Let's say it's done, Charlie.'

'Well, we'll take two days to consider it, both of us, and I'll sound Adelaide, and then we can go into committee of ways and means.'

'It's settled, I think,' said Merivale quietly, looking the relief he felt.

They sat far into the night discussing every side of the proposed new arrangement, and arriving at the conclusion that it was the only possible one. They talked of most things of mutual interest, but Merivale did not mention that he had been at the Cromwell Road and had seen Janet Romaine.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE COMPELLING EYE

**H**YDE PARK on a Sunday afternoon in June, after a night's refreshing rain that had washed the atmosphere clean of every impurity, made the turf a thing of emerald beauty, given the drooping flowers a new lease of life. It was the very height of the season, and though the week-end exodus had not been seriously checked, there still remained thousands in the city to enjoy the wonderful open spaces which single London out from all the capitals of the world.

Sunday afternoon brought from remote suburbs, from the grim, grey areas which lie riverwards on the Surrey side, a cosmopolitan crowd. It was their day for seeing London, for enjoying what it could offer, for the only claim they made upon the great heritage of the people.

About four o'clock, the usual crowd, considerably increased in dimensions, gathered about the Reformers' Tree in the Park, within a short stone's throw of the Marble Arch. A rude platform was erected under it, a flag was raised on which was

## The Fighting Line

printed the legend so common in France : ' Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.' A number of foreign-looking men hung about the platform, and when the proceedings commenced, it was a foreigner who spoke, a Swiss malcontent from Zurich, empowered to bring greetings to his compeers in London, and incidentally to grind a few axes on his own account.

Unlike most of the foreign delegates, he was a man of fine presence and commanding looks, and the crowd liked the flaming red tie, with the loose ends swaying in the wind, his impassioned eagerness, his picturesque, somewhat leonine head, only unfortunately they did not understand a word he said. He spoke volubly, now in French, now in German, and was vigorously applauded by his immediate supporters, and clapped by the good-natured, curious crowd on the outskirts, who had very little idea what it was all about.

The harangues under the Reformers' Tree were part of the Sunday afternoon programme ; lovers strolled from the shadows of the trees for a moment to listen, and clung to each other, whispering as they passed on again ; little family groups stopped to see what was going on, and if paterfamilias was keen on reforms, he would press farther in, so as not to lose a word, while his partner and children would move away and squat on the grass to wait comfortably until he had had enough. It was a

## The Compelling Eye

quiet, gay, and rather a chaffing crowd, except near the front, where there was plenty of seriousness and impassioned eloquence ; a few straggling cheers were raised very occasionally, when some smart hit moved the more intelligent, or there was an appeal made on behalf of the working-man and his rights. But it was not, in the main, at all a serious crowd, and any outside observer, intent on discovering the temper of London from the scene, would have departed assured that it had nothing to complain of, nor was it in any sense a menace to the public peace.

About a quarter past four Freeman appeared on the scene, arriving at the Marble Arch Tube Station, and crossing from thence to the familiar rendezvous. He was quite alone, and had been in the house all day with the boy, who seemed to be drooping, and suffering much. This doubtless accounted for the cloud on his face ; he had scarcely a smile for those about the platform who knew him and were expecting him. Freeman always drew and interested the crowd ; he had a facile gift of speech, a gleam of occasional humour, a gift in which his compeers sadly lacked, and he often played upon the temper of the Sunday afternoon audiences, until he could do what he willed with them. But he was in a bitter mood that afternoon ; all things were out of joint with him. In his many visits to the labour centres abroad, he

## The Fighting Line

had picked up a smattering of French, which he had augmented with much laborious study at home; he therefore understood all that the picturesque orator from Zurich was saying, and though it was much more fiery than anything the English Socialist ventures upon, it found an echo in his heart.

The dumb sufferings of the poor, the wrongs of the workers, who are the real empire-builders, the heartless tyranny of the rich—these were the familiar themes. Freeman had sometimes sickened of them, but to-day he was all zeal and fire. When he got on the platform he embarked upon the old, well-worn theme—the feud between the rich and the poor, the conditions of working life in congested areas, the frightful waste and misery in communities large enough to swamp the non-productive portion, if they were sufficiently alive at once to their own misery and their own power.

Never had he spoken with more power, with more enthralling eloquence. That the man had suffered could be gathered from his knit brows, the haggard lines on his face. He was so poor that he could not afford to take his sick, perhaps dying, boy away from the evil odours of the Walworth Road, and the iron had freshly entered into his soul.

He had been speaking for about ten minutes

## The Compelling Eye

when a well-dressed, middle-aged gentleman, strolling inwards from the Arch, paused for a few moments on the outskirts of the crowd to listen. His appearance and presence would have singled him out for attention anywhere ; many glanced at him curiously.

‘ That’s one of the toffs, a real one, Patsy,’ whispered a youth in a festive straw hat to his sweetheart. ‘ Wonder ’ow ’e likes it ? Go it, old Freeman, give it ’em ’ot ! ’

Franklin Agar, in a well-cut summer suit of light grey, a white waistcoat, and a silk hat, paid no heed to the comments or the significant glances of the crowd, one or two units in which recognised him ; he was too deeply interested in what he heard. He knew Freeman quite well by repute ; he had had indeed some correspondence with him on various matters ; he now felt somewhat drawn to the man. The pabulum of which he was delivering himself did not greatly interest him ; it was the common rant of his class, handed down from time immemorial, only made a little more interesting by reason of the virile personality of the speaker.

Himself a student of men, a quick and nearly always unerring judge of human character and motive, he readily understood that some bitterness of personal experience underlay the acrid sentences which fell from Freeman’s lips. Something had

## The Fighting Line

soured and embittered him, had thrown his perspective of life out of all proportion. He did not lack intelligence. Agar felt that he must know this man, must get in closer touch with him. He soon tired of the harangue, of the familiar shibboleth against capital, and stepped back a little, chiefly to escape the observation of those immediately about the platform. He knew that Freeman had observed him; once he met his eyes, and at that very moment, as if to drive home his rebellious attitude of mind, he gave vent to the most outrageous statement as to the remedy the poor had in their hands against a power that was at once aggressive, selfish, and cruel. Agar shook his head, smiled a trifle pensively, and stepped back. Freeman thought he had gone, and his tongue seemed to slacken, his peroration, usually the best part of his speech, lacked fire, and he stepped down, unconvinced himself, and feeling that in spite of all his expenditure of energy, never had his remarks been more futile, or left less impression on the crowd.

It is a depressing experience for an orator, and he made his way to the outside of the crowd, determined to get back to Manny without delay. Manny represented the only audience fit to speak to—the only sympathetic, right-judging, pure-minded section of the whole community! He reached the outside limit of the crowd, and sought

## The Compelling Eye

to disappear among the trees. Some one followed him, and touched his arm.

'Good-afternoon, friend,' said the voice of Franklin Agar. 'I think the time has come for you and me to know one another.'

Freeman did not smile.

'If you have finished your peroration,' observed Agar, with a slight, whimsical look, 'suppose we take a turn.'

Freeman looked surprised, and still hesitated. But the eyes of the statesman were upon him—compelling eyes he could not resist. He turned, and they walked away side by side. One or two, recognising them both, wondered a little, and realised that they had perhaps witnessed a significant incident.

'A curious and quite informing bit of London life this always appears to me,' said Agar, as they left the throng behind.

'I have never seen you here before, Mr. Agar; but of course I know you quite well, having heard you in the House, and elsewhere.'

'I have heard you harangue the proletariat for the first time to-day, and I must say you do it uncommonly well,' said Agar, in a good-humoured, perhaps slightly cynical voice, which Freeman in his present mood was quick to resent. 'And when one thinks, indeed knows, that it is leaders of men we want at the moment more than

## The Fighting Line

anything else, one naturally deplores the waste of good material.'

It was an undoubted compliment, but Freeman continued in resentful mood.

'At least I am sincere,' he said gloomily. 'And I, so far as in me lies, try to practise what I preach.'

'That I could very well believe,' replied Agar quietly. 'Doubtless you have had some untoward, embittering experiences. That is the common lot of all. But while personal experience may colour a man's point of view, it can never affect the main issue. You say you are sincere, but I cannot imagine that a man of your parts could accept or believe the balderdash you have been talking for the last hour——'

He chose the word deliberately, but did not look at Freeman as he uttered it. After an instant's silence, he repeated it.

'The balderdash which, if it had any chance of reaching, for practical purposes, beyond the limits of Hyde Park, would have to be suppressed by some drastic measure. It serves as a safety-valve for personal disappointment, and the authorities are wise in treating it as such.'

'You are severe, but I understand, of course, that you voice the views of your class,' said Freeman quickly.

'I have no class,' answered Agar, with a faintly, melancholy smile.

## The Compelling Eye

'A class,' pursued Freeman steadily, 'that is as arrogant as it is ignorant. What does Hyde Park or Belgravia know of the suffering or temper of the real London, that works while they sleep and idle through luxurious days? I tell you, sir, you and others like you, supposed to be legislators for the men and women who live and work and suffer, are on the brink of a great awakening.'

Agar smiled again, and his face looked very winning. Deep in his eyes dwelt that inexplicable sadness which had struck Merivale at the meeting at the Lambeth Baths, and which Freeman now observed and wondered at.

'Are you disengaged for the next hour?' asked Agar, as if he no longer wished to pursue the argumentative line.

'Yes, practically, though I ought to go home.'

'If you can spare it, will you come home with me? I live not far off, in Connaught Place. I have some one at home who would like very much to see you.'

'I ought not to go there, ~~Mr. Agar~~, feeling as I do towards you and your class.'

'I will not have the word said,' said Agar, in gentle raillery. 'It means nothing. But even if we were twice as diametrically opposed, there is no reason why we should not find one little square of meeting-ground on a Sunday afternoon. I assure you, you will not find politics discussed at

## The Fighting Line

my tea-table. I find six days a week sufficient for the mind and body of any man.'

Freeman hesitated a moment, but again felt the compelling eyes upon him.

'Thank you, I will come,' he said at last.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE BOND

THEY made a *détour* by the Serpentine and came out upon the Bayswater Road some distance below Connaught Place. They did not talk much, but Agar's face wore a genial look, as of a man who had unexpectedly obtained that on which he had set his heart. They passed the front of Agar's house, where the balconies were laden with flowers and shrubs, affording a pleasant screen from the busy street. The entrance was behind, and Freeman was surprised, as they stepped to the back of the tall houses, to hear how the roar of the traffic was deadened. Agar let himself in with a latchkey. The lower hall was rather bare. Freeman was surprised to find how plainly furnished it was, also a little gloomy, but the light broadened as they ascended the wide staircase, and on the upper landing the sun lay in a golden flood. Here were warm crimson carpets, some palms, and gleams of white statuary; also an air of space and freedom very pleasant.

'I ought to tell you,' said Agar, pausing a

## The Fighting Line

moment on the landing. 'I have only one son ; we live alone together in this house, he and I, though my sister, Lady Tyrrwhit, is good enough to spend as much time as she can with us. She is not here at present, however. My son is an invalid.'

Freeman started. 'An invalid, sir ? So is mine.'

Agar looked surprised.

'I was not aware you were—you were a married man, Mr. Freeman.'

'My wife died eleven years ago—only the little chap and I are left,' he answered, and looking at the expression on his face, the transforming tenderness, Agar there and then obtained a key to his heart he never lost again. He leaned for a moment against a cabinet which stood close to the wall, anxious to put a few questions.

'I am sorry to hear that. How old is he ?'

'Nearly fifteen, but he looks a mere baby.'

'And what is the trouble ?'

'Spine. He was born strong, but an accident happened, the sort of accident which ought not to have happened if a rich landlord had done his duty by his tenants.'

'Can nothing be done ?'

'I think not. He has been to every hospital. Of course, I have not had the means to try private skill, but I am assured that the injury to the spine is quite hopeless.'

## The Bond

'I am very sorry, friend, and, as it happens, I can sympathise with you to the full; I have only one son, such an one as might have made a father proud. I was proud of him, and we have managed to get him to manhood, but he may die at any moment. He can never have any career, nor can he marry. My sister is childless, so with this generation the Agars of Wrest Park pass out of existence.'

He drew himself up, as if some stab went anew to his heart.

'What is the matter with the lad?' asked Freeman, his face soft, his voice gentle with the new compassion in his soul.

'It is his heart. Outwardly, though he looks delicate, you would notice nothing. He overstrained himself at Oxford; he was keen, and I was keen for him, and he began a notable career. But it stopped short, and the end may be any day—probably when we are least expecting it.'

'Sir, believe me, I feel for you deeply,' said Freeman quickly. 'I had no idea.'

'We never do have any idea, do we, of the inner life of one another, and it is good that occasionally we get a glimpse behind the veil. When I said this afternoon that we might surely find some little square of meeting-ground, I had no idea we should discover a bond so intimate—the bond of disappointed hopes, I suppose the world

## The Fighting Line

would call it. But you will not find the atmosphere of disappointed hope in the room to which we are going.'

'He knows, I suppose?' said Freeman vaguely.

Agar smiled a little drearily.

'He knew it a full year before I did, and kept his secret well. He taught me many lessons, all I know at the present moment of the Christian faith. But let us go in. I thought I had better prepare you, and I ought to tell you that it will give him an uncommon pleasure to meet you. He has followed your career with interest, and he reads all the printed matter that concerns you. You will find him at once the keenest of critics and the most sympathetic of friends.'

He stepped along the corridor, Freeman following, thinking many things; uppermost was the feeling of shame, because of his continuous harsh judgment of this man, of whom he had known nothing. Agar opened the third door on the landing, and stood aside, motioning Freeman to enter. He followed him immediately, and closed the door. A lovely odour of flowers met them on the threshold. It was a spacious chamber, furnished with extreme simplicity, giving the idea of space and light and air, rather than of luxury. Three long windows opened on the balcony. It was one of the reception-rooms of the house, chosen by Agar for his son's daily use because it

## The Bond

was the pleasantest room in the house, and had a fine view of the park. Looking through the greenery and the glow of the flower-laden balcony, one might have imagined London a hundred miles away. A great box of mignonette set in front of the window filled all the air. Ever afterwards, Freeman associated the smell of mignonette with a June Sunday afternoon in Connaught Place.

'I have secured a prize, Gerald,' said Agar, in a hearty, pleasant voice. 'I have captured our friend Freeman; here he comes!'

Freeman stepped forward to the couch, which stood across the middle of the window, so placed that its occupant could see right across the park. A young man lay there, half-propped among cushions. Freeman could see that his figure was tall and well-proportioned, and the face was one of the handsomest he had ever seen. The features, not unlike Agar's own, were of a most refined order, and bore the stamp of high-souled purity, such as would naturally belong to one who lived outside the world. The skin was clear and transparent, the blue eyes large and luminous, the mouth in repose very pleasant, though it had strong lines, like those which accentuated the power of his father's face. The making of greatness was there, undoubtedly. Some half-forgotten words ran through Freeman's brain; he could not even give them proper shape, it was some-

## The Fighting Line

thing about—'Greater is he who possesses his soul than he who takes a city.'

'I am very glad to see you, Mr. Freeman,' he said, with a bright smile. 'I assure you, I know you quite well. I have been able to make a bee-line in my mind's eye to the Reformers' Tree from the window and imagine I heard you. How kind it is of you to come here and see me!'

'It is a privilege,' murmured Freeman, and he meant what he said. He felt a curious quick sense of shame. He could make a noise in the world, according to his light, and did make it. This man, with the greater gifts, had learned to lie still. He was not unfamiliar with the exhibition of patience under trying conditions, and had often thought the case of his own boy the hardest in the world, but he knew now that this was harder, because it involved a greater sacrifice.

'Won't you sit down; and can we have tea up, dad?' asked Gerald. 'Proudfoct has been up three times to ask if I would have it, but I said, No, because you promised to be back. I have a Scotch servant and chum, Mr. Freeman, a great character, who keeps both the dad and me in order.'

Freeman smiled and sat down. He had no desire to say much; he felt that he had come to hear and to see. He was silently noting all the time the various appurtenances of the room: the



'HAVE YOU BEEN SPEAKING IN THE PARK TO-DAY?' ASKED GERALD.



## The Bond

book-lined walls, the table littered with papers and magazines, the writing-materials; everything lying to the hand of an invalid of a bookish turn.

'It is very pleasant here,' he murmured, inconsequently, and rather to himself than to those listening.

'When one is confined to one room, one has to make the best of it,' replied Gerald quietly. 'Have you been speaking in the Park to-day?'

'Yes,' replied Freeman, rather shortly.

'What was the theme? I saw from last night's papers that Durand from Zurich was to speak. Did you hear him, dad?'

'No. I only arrived in time to hear our friend here.'

'Talking balderdash,' put in Freeman, with a dry smile. 'So your father assured me, Mr. Gerald.'

Gerald laughed. 'He doesn't mince his words, that's why he gets into so much hot water. You have no idea what hard work I have here, licking his speeches into shape; and then he goes out straightway and forgets all I have said, and breaks out in a new place.'

The look which passed between them was one of perfect confidence and affection. Freeman felt a lump in his throat. Just so did Manny regard him, criticising his efforts, correcting him, putting

## The Fighting Line

him right on a hundred points. The wonder of the parallel grew.

The redoubtable Proudfoot, a middle-aged Scotsman with a hatchet face, and a manner worth an additional ten pounds a year in any serious household, brought in the tea-tray. Freeman watched him as he waited on his young master, by whom he was rewarded by a word of thanks.

‘What do you know about Durand, Mr. Gerald?’ inquired Freeman.

‘Oh, I know them all by name; the only one I was sorry not to see was Monsieur Carolan from Paris, who made such a noise on May Day. Unfortunately my father was laid up with influenza that day, and I got no information first-hand. Were you there, Mr. Freeman?’

‘No, I was in Paris myself.’

‘Taking Carolan’s place, perhaps?’

‘Well, I spoke on one of his platforms,’ admitted Freeman, with a smile.

‘It interests me immensely. It is one of the things I keep on wanting to do, to go out in the Park and hear you all. Now I have no ambition to hear them in the House of Commons; very treasonable, isn’t it?’

‘My son has always been interested in all that concerns the people,’ remarked Agar, as he filled up Freeman’s cup. ‘He often assures me it is as

## The Bond

well he is chained down here, or we should be scandalised with his behaviour outside.'

'Life is the thing,' said Gerald. 'And it is only the people who have courage to live.'

'Or would have,' put in Freeman rather warmly, 'if they had any chance.'

Gerald nodded. 'Precisely. The conditions are not favourable. I hope you will come and see me often, Mr. Freeman. I should like to tell you something about what the dad calls the 'Great Impossible Plan.''

'I should like to come,' said Freeman readily. 'I consider this a very special opportunity and privilege.'

'It is a kindness to me, I assure you. When one is an invalid, one gets used to being shelved. People are kind in a casual way to those who are ill, but they don't keep on. Do you possess that virtue, the art of keeping on?'

'It has been cultivated in a similar atmosphere, Mr. Gerald. I too have an only son. He is an invalid who lies all day on his back; he is one degree less to be envied than you, because his surroundings are less pleasant, and he can never sit up, even for half an hour.'

It was wonderful to see the expression of Gerald Agar's face.

'Have you heard that, dad, about Mr. Freeman's son? Extraordinary similarity, isn't it?'

## The Fighting Line

'He had just told me before we came to you. I felt sure there would be a bond,' replied Agar quietly.

'Tell me about him—all about him, and the longer you are in the telling, the better I shall be pleased.'

Freeman needed no second bidding; he could be eloquent indeed where Manny was concerned. He did not know how long he had talked or what language he had used, but those who listened obtained, through his words, an insight into his heart and life which nothing else could have given them.

'And now I must go back to him. I have not played fair to-day; I promised to be back for tea, but when he hears, he will forgive me; he is really a very generous little chap.'

'I must know him,' said Gerald, in a low voice. 'Promise me that I shall get to know him.'

'If it can be arranged, Manny would only be too happy. His real name is Jack; Manny was his mother's name for him, and it has stuck.'

'And you'll come again?'

'Yes,' said Freeman, as he bent with eyes curiously full over the couch. 'Whenever I am asked, I will come again.'

'You are asked, isn't he, dad? Shall we make tryst?' asked Gerald eagerly. 'Every week after the speaking is over in Hyde Park until we go to Wrest Park. Will you promise?'

## The Bond

‘ Yes, I will ; every afternoon that I have to be in Hyde Park I will come.’

They shook hands, and Agar himself escorted Freeman down to the door. Freeman was unaware, of course, that this was a special attention.

‘ Good-bye, Mr. Agar, I am glad I came,’ he said quite simply, as they stood an instant at the open door.

‘ It is the beginning of things,’ answered Agar quickly. ‘ We have found the bond.’

## CHAPTER XX

### SUNDAY EVENING

**T**HE bells were ringing for evening service when Freeman got off the omnibus opposite his house in the Walworth Road. Ere he got down he returned the wave of Manny's thin hand from behind the flower-box in the open window. Three minutes later he was in the room.

'Very sorry, Captain, I've played truant—shocking truant. Am I forgiven?'

He bent down and kissed the boy fondly, and Manny, quick to respond to every mood, understood that his father, wherever he had been, had had a pleasant afternoon.

'We waited ever so long, dad, and at last Adelaide brought up the tea, and she drank some out of your cup. She said you wouldn't mind.'

'No, Captain, I don't mind. Bless Adelaide, she always thinks of the right thing. Played at being the heavy father, eh?'

'We didn't play at anything, we wondered where you were. Did you get any tea, dad?'

'Yes, I've been out to tea, Manny; where do you think?'

## Sunday Evening

'At Buckingham Palace,' replied the lad, with his quaint smile. 'I always say to Adelaide when you're late, that the King has sent for you to Buckingham Palace. You will go there, you know, before I die, so as you can tell me what it's like inside.'

'I won't go anywhere if you talk about dying, Captain. Don't forget you promised never to speak like that again.'

'Well, s'posing you tell me now where you've been, eh?' said the lad, smiling all over his face. 'Honest Injin, tell me everything; if I catch you hiding anything, it'll be the worse for you.'

Freeman scarcely smiled, though the whimsical talk was the dearest part of their dual life.

'I've been to tea in a great big house, Captain, almost a palace, with a man—a man I hated, because I didn't know him.'

'That's how it is,' said the lad sagely. 'The dustman—do you mind how Adelaide used to hate him, until one day he brought the windmill for me? We knew then he was all right. And all the people who live in big houses, dad, can't be cruel and wicked, or God would burn them up.'

'Do you remember me showing you a picture in the paper one day, of a man with a clean-shaven face, and telling you he was the worst of the batch, and that so long as he had power, the working-man would be crushed?'

## The Fighting Line

‘ Yes, and when I looked at his face, I didn’t believe it.’

‘ But you never said a word, you little beggar ! ’ said Freeman quickly. ‘ Well, I’ve been at his house to-day, and his boy—he’s not exactly a boy, but a grown-up man. But he’s just like you, Captain, only a little worse perhaps, because you see he’s too big for his father to carry him.’

‘ Oh ! ’ cried Manny, in intense interest. ‘ Tell me all about him, every single thing. Isn’t his poor father sorry for him, as you are for me, and does he cry when his back hurts ? ’

Freeman thought of the scene he had left scarce an hour ago—the long, cosy room, with its glow and scent of flowers, its nameless charm of homeliness ; of the couch by the window, the wasted figure upon it ; the worn face with its high, white brow—the seat of noble gifts ; and the look on the father’s face.

‘ I think he feels just the same, Captain, only perhaps a little worse.’

‘ Why ? ’ asked Manny, with the same eager look.

‘ Well, you see, he’s very rich, and there are great houses and traditions and all sorts of things—the things I’m always haranguing against, boy—and he’s the last of his race. Don’t you see, there’ll be no more handing down ? ’

‘ But won’t that be a good thing ? ’ inquired Manny cheerfully.

## Sunday Evening

'It ought to be.'

'But who'll get all the money and the houses and the traditions?'

Freeman shook his head.

'I don't know, Captain; that's the bit, I think, that hurts—at least the old man, the other one doesn't care.'

'Adelaide was telling me, dad, the bit from last Sunday over again, about the rich ruler. He's like the rich ruler, isn't he? The Captain wants him to give up everything. He'll be obeying the Captain, won't he, when he gives it all up?'

Freeman's eyes filled with sudden tears.

'He obeys quietly and bravely while I talk about it, for I had nothing to give up, only you, and I was always grudging you.'

'But will the other one die soon?'

'Within a year, probably, but it may be any day.'

'And doesn't he mind?'

'He doesn't mind. He knew it a long time himself before he even told his father.'

Manny looked awestricken.

'Oh, I do want to see him!'

'Perhaps you will—yes, you will, if I have to carry you to the Bayswater Road myself.'

He moved to the window and stood there in silence a moment, looking out upon the throng of the street. At the opposite corner there were a

## The Fighting Line

number of Salvationists holding an open-air meeting, the band playing up for the first hymn. It was a fine old swinging tune, familiar to him since his boyhood. He stood quite still while they sang, every word going home.

Were the whole realm of Nature mine,  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

'Manny,' he said, after a moment, 'have you forgotten that we are moving on Tuesday to the Isle of Dogs?'

'No, dad, I haven't forgotten. Adelaide and I were talking of it at tea, and she was crying a little because——'

'Crying!' repeated Freeman, turning round sharply. 'I thought she was delighted.'

'So she is, dad; but there's Albert Edward and Mr. Jones and the dustman, you see, and even Skimmings; she's been very decent to Adelaide since you told her, and yesterday gave her a piece of stuff to make a new frock, only it's green, and Adelaide is not sure if it will suit her complexion.'

Freeman laughed.

'Here's Uncle George coming up the street. We mustn't let him know there's any regrets. He's going to be very glad to have us; and you will like it there, Manny; you'll be able to get out every day.'

## Sunday Evening

'But it'll be farther for you to carry me to see the other one.'

'I think I'll be able to manage that; it's near the station, anyhow. Perhaps you may go on the Tuppenny Tube one day, after all.'

He went out to the landing to receive Merivale, whom he observed was dressed with more than his usual care.

'I came round by the Park, Charlie,' he said, as they shook hands. 'Heard you'd been there; I think I must have just missed you. How's Manny?'

'All right, Uncle George,' piped the shrill voice from within. 'We've had a most exciting day.'

Merivale laughed at the choice of words as he passed into the room.

'It's hot outside,' he observed, as he wiped his face with his handkerchief. 'The air may be less fine, but we do get a little more of it down East. There was quite a breeze on the river this morning when I got up. Well, old man, got your goods and chattels packed up, eh?'

'I haven't got any, only Robinson, and I'm fearfully excited because we're all coming on the greengrocer's van. Adelaide has a plan. I'm to be packed up along with the sofa cushions, so's I don't feel the jolting; but she's promised to pile me up high, so's I can see everything. Tell Uncle George about the other one, dad.'

## The Fighting Line

But Freeman did not seem inclined ; he felt, indeed, a curious reticence regarding the incident of the afternoon, and wished he had warned Manny not to speak about it. He would have told Merivale in his own time and way.

‘What other one?’ inquired Merivale, as he sat down close by the couch near the dusty geraniums and marguerites, which did not grow to great luxury in the Walworth Road.

Manny waited, and when his father did not speak, he proceeded to try and enlighten Merivale himself.

‘Daddy didn’t come in to tea ; he went to the rich man’s house, didn’t you, dad?’

‘Yes,’ said Freeman awkwardly. ‘It was Franklin Agar’s house, Geo. He happened to stop for a bit to listen to the spouting, and spoke to me afterwards. Then he asked me to go to his house to be introduced to his son. I don’t know whether I ought to have refused, I half wish I had ; but there it is.’

‘And he’s like me,’ put in Manny eagerly. ‘On’y worse, and there can’t ever be any handing down.’

Merivale looked mystified.

‘It’s Manny’s way of putting it, queer little beggar,’ put in Freeman, with a half-smile. ‘He has only one son, an invalid like Manny, and he’s the last of his race. That’s what Manny means about the handing down. We’ve been talking

## Sunday Evening

about it. It's fatal to talk about anything to him ; he never forgets it, or lets it grow cold, so to speak. He'll hammer away at it until something else turns up. This'll do until Tuesday, when we begin the great removal.'

Merivale looked surprised, in fact he was very much surprised at the news, but he did not make any remark.

'And I'm to go and see him,' continued Manny, with triumphant eagerness. 'Dad's going to take me himself, and we'll have to go in the train, now, all the way, when we come to your house—I mean, the train and the Tuppenny Tube.'

'What sort of a man is Franklin Agar when you get near him?' asked Merivale interestedly, remembering how he had felt drawn to him at the Lambeth Baths.

'He seems much the same as the rest of us,' admitted Freeman. 'Astonishingly human. We did not talk politics at all ; it seems they are barred inside the house.'

'It hardly seems possible, in the house of a Cabinet Minister.'

'Well, you see, there's only himself and his son, and he's outside party politics. It's humanity at large that interests him. Doubtless it is that influence which has made Agar what he is, kept him above and apart from the usual ring of party politics. I must say they were very blind, and the

## The Fighting Line

incident interested me. I don't know that it ought to be repeated, however ; there is always the gulf. Well, how are you getting along ? I haven't seen you for four days.'

'I'm all right. We've done the spring cleaning, Manny,' he said, with a smile to the invalid lad, 'and you're to have the little room above the sitting-room. It's such a little, shallow stair that it'll be nothing to carry you up and down ; then when it happens that you are too lazy to come down, or it should be too wet for the garden, you can lie near the window and count the ships.'

'I'll keep a register of the Thames shipping,' said Manny proudly. 'Adelaide and me's been arranging it. She's to watch when I can't ; we want to know how many go up and down every day.'

'A grand mental exercise for you,' laughed Merivale. 'I'll offer a prize for the biggest record. I had another letter from Larmer, Charlie. He arrived off Plymouth yesterday, and is in London to-day. I expected a summons from him, but he'll turn up at the works to-morrow morning. I shall have a stiff day giving an account of my stewardship.'

'You needn't have any qualms. If every steward was as well prepared, it would be a jolly good thing,' said Freeman affectionately.

'I half wish we hadn't concluded this arrange-

## Sunday Evening

ment until I had seen Larmer. It may alter everything.'

'I don't think it will. Well, old chappie, you'll go to bed, I think, while Uncle Geo and I take a stroll, and don't dream too much. Which is it to be, the removal or the rich man's son?'

'I don't know,' said Manny, with a curious, half-wistful smile. 'The other one makes me want to cry. I wish there could have been handing down.'

'No Socialism there,' said Freeman, with a half-laugh as they left the room. 'He's his mother's son all over. Many a time she used to say to me, "What a fool you are, Charlie; the cream will rise to the top all the world over, in spite of all the spouting in the world."'

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE NEW POINT OF VIEW

MERIVALE had been quietly getting ready for Larmer's return, and there was no special preparation in view for the day of his arrival. He had informed one or two heads of departments of the return of the head of the concern, but had not hinted anything of his own possible plans. He felt that it would be time enough for them to be mooted when he actually appeared in the flesh.

Between nine and ten o'clock, at a time when the works were practically emptied for breakfast, Larmer walked quietly down from Poplar Station to the 'great gates.

Since his sister had left him, Merivale had taken most of his meals at the works, where they were prepared by the porter's wife at the lodge. He had breakfasted, however, and was looking at some of the letters, when the office door opened, and Larmer entered quietly. They had not met for five years, and had then known very little of one another. Merivale jumped up a little awkwardly, conscious of the curious strain of the moment. Larmer stretched out a very frank hand.

## The New Point of View

'How do you do, Merivale? I'm glad to find you here at the old post.'

'Glad to see you back, sir, and looking well and fit,' replied Merivale, quite sincerely. His keen eye travelled over the face and figure of a man whose action might make so much difference to his life, and he was quite conscious of some indefinable change. Larmer had aged in five years; the hair at his temples was quite grey; he was not tall, his figure had even less grace than Merivale's own, but it was well set-up and developed by years of military training. He had the good, square bullet head which is typical of the British soldier wherever found, and a firm, strong face illumined by a pair of keen, intelligent, grey eyes. He wore a short, slight moustache, and his hair under the brown bowler hat was closely cut. He drew in a chair and sat down, wiping the moisture from his brow.

'It's hot, jolly hot, in these Underground trains.'

'After India, sir, I did not think you would have felt it.'

'There's a penetrating quality in the heat here. Well, I suppose my letter came as a surprise.'

'It did,' replied Merivale quietly, but he did not say he was pleased or otherwise; he was in the position of waiting further developments, and the issue, one way or another, did not seriously affect him. He would go or stay as seemed best, after he

## The Fighting Line

had given the new conditions a fair trial. This attitude of mind naturally imparted perfect ease to his manner, and Larmer speedily gathered that Merivale, at least, had nothing to fear from a thorough investigation of his stewardship. But indeed that was not the spirit in which he had come home.

‘I need not enter into the reasons which induced me to take this rather unusual step,’ he began, in the somewhat abrupt, jerky manner peculiar to him. ‘Another day we may talk about it. It is a little bit of human experience that may interest you. Before we go any further, I should like to impress upon you my gratitude for your faithful discharge of duty here. I have not realised up to now how much it meant to me and my interests.’

‘I have done my duty, sir, and it has pleased me to do it. Believe me, my zeal has never exceeded it.’ He smiled somewhat drily as he uttered these words, from which Larmer might take what meaning he chose. He was quick enough to take the right one.

‘You mean, of course, that you have not been enthusiastic. Well, I don’t very well see how you could be. You have written me a good many letters about what was needed here, all of which I have tossed into the fire.’

‘They contained only what was reasonable,’ Merivale assured him, slightly nettled at these

## The New Point of View

words. For the effort to set forth the actual condition of things at the works to an ignorant and indifferent man had been a somewhat difficult and always futile task.

'I grant that fully, and am sorry that the whole ground will have to be gone over again. I intend to learn the business from the beginning, and I shall look to you to teach me.'

Merivale looked surprised, even a trifle dismayed.

'Surely that will be unnecessary, Mr. Larmer. There are certain technicalities you will soon master. The staff and employees are fairly efficient, and you will find the concern in good working order, and that very few, if any, drastic changes will be necessary.'

'Don't speak as if you were going to leave me in the lurch,' said Larmer good-naturedly. 'I've a good mind to make a solemn covenant with you now.'

Merivale smiled.

'It will not be necessary. I have had thoughts of leaving, sir, and going abroad, but there is no hurry. I am perfectly unattached, and if I can be of use to you I shall be glad to remain until you have no further need of me.'

'Use! you are the soul of this business, and there must be no talk of leaving,' said Larmer rather warmly. 'It is not only technicalities that I have to learn, but ethics—the first principles of

## The Fighting Line

the Christian man's Christian duty to his fellow. And you are the man who can teach me.'

Merivale almost started, and began to obtain a glimmering of what might have happened.

'I do not profess to any great display of the Christian virtues, Mr. Larmer. I was reared in a hard school; I have lived a poor man, among the poor, all my life, and I do what I can. One's sympathies get broadened in an atmosphere such as this, but also, if I may put it so without incongruity, one gets hardened, through the necessity of looking sharply at all sides. I believe, myself, that misplaced sympathy and indiscriminate charity have been the ruin of our East End.'

Larmer tugged at his short moustache, intently studying Merivale's face. It was not surprising that he represented the oracle to him at the moment, even the master, at whose feet he would sit and learn.

'You surprise me; I should have thought there never could be too much sympathy.'

'Neither can there, but its misapplication is disastrous,' replied Merivale.

Larmer's attitude somewhat dismayed him. He had seen all the evils of undisciplined philanthropy, its complete abuse in the quarters it only helped to demoralise; and he wished that Larmer had appeared in any rôle but that of philanthropist.

'I should say that the men here, Mr. Larmer,

## The New Point of View

work under fair conditions, and if only there could be driven into them some sense of responsibility where their work is concerned, we should have fewer worries. They need neither sympathy nor charity. They can earn a living wage, if only they will give a working-day to it. But the half of them don't. Your father was a wise man in insisting that the piece-work arrangement should prevail in every department where it was possible to establish it. It is a man's test, so to speak ; but only a few of them—I could name them on my ten fingers—come well out of it.'

'And the rest? The day-wage men?'

Merivale shrugged his shoulders.

'They want watching, sir,' was all he said.

'You depress me,' said Larmer. 'I have come home imbued with the idea of the brotherhood of man, enthusiastic over the field I have neglected so long.'

'There is no reason for depression, and there is always room for practice of such ideas. You interest me very much. May I inquire, without seeming too curious, how such ideas ever came to grow in the soil of British militarism in India? I should have thought it fatal to it.'

Larmer smiled faintly.

'It's a long story, Merivale, and as I have said, there cannot be time for it to-day ; I shall have many opportunities. I may just tell you I had a

## The Fighting Line

long, serious illness, and while it was in progress I fell under a very strong influence, which altered my whole view of life. Let us, meantime, deal with the actual results. May I ask if you are still living at the house by the river ?'

'Yes,' said Merivale, and his face quickly saddened.

'It is my intention to come down here to live. I have no particular ties to bind me to London or anywhere else, and the schemes I have in my mind will be best strengthened and brought to fruitful action by residence among my own people.'

The phrase struck Merivale, and again a little dismayed him. He had expected something far different—the martinet spirit, only concerned to get the maximum of work for the minimum of pay. He was not sure, however, whether this attitude of mind would not complicate matters more completely than the other.

'You would find the life here in Poplar trying,' was all he said.

'It may be, but my mind is made up. I have thought it all over, and it even occurred to me that you might take me in at the River House. I remember it as a place where a man might cultivate individual taste and feel himself a little out of the beaten track.'

'I like the house very much, Mr. Larmer. I should be really sorry to leave it, though it is,

## The New Point of View

frankly, in a shocking state of repair. A few necessary things have been done to keep it from falling to pieces, but I fear that will happen ere long.'

'It must be seen to,' said Larmer quickly. 'My father was very fond of the house, and, I know, wished to preserve it. We will get expert opinion. But what would be the objection to my having rooms there? I assure you I would not molest you nor make myself obnoxious.'

'I am sure of that; but I could vacate the house, Mr. Larmer, and find another.'

'But why, if you are alone there?'

'But I shall not be alone after to-morrow. My sister has not been gone long, and I have only just completed a new arrangement. I have asked a friend—you would not know the name, that of Charles Freeman, the Socialist—with his little invalid boy, and their maid, to come and share the house, paying their own part of the expenses. To set aside the arrangement now would inflict the keenest disappointment upon the little lad; I could not do it.'

'I would not ask you. I shall find other quarters, probably here. A soldier is not particular, a shake-down anywhere serves him. Now I think we understand one another a little, don't we?'

'There is the horn,' said Merivale quickly.

## The Fighting Line

' Shall we gather the men as they come in at the gate, and let you have a word with them ? '

But Larmer looked shamefaced and reluctant.

' I should not like that,' he said quickly. ' I don't want to make any fuss, but to slip quietly into some niche, until I get the hang of things, understand.'

' It is hardly the position for a master to take up,' Merivale reminded him.

' But I am not master yet, master of anything, even myself.'

' You are the head of the firm, sir ; and the British working-man is like this, he only respects authority when it is evident. If I may advise, it is that you take up your position at once.'

' I couldn't harangue them, Merivale, I must get to know them first,' said Larmer, as he moved towards the window, arrested by the sound of many feet.

For about three minutes a continuous stream of men flowed through the big gates, passing by the windows of the office, and in the wider yard, melting to their various posts. His face as he watched them was a curious study. Merivale, in the background, was as interested in him as he was interested in the men.

' There's a lot of them, Merivale. A big problem to tackle, eh ? '

' Well, if you put it that way, I suppose it

## The New Point of View

is a big problem. There are some fine fellows among them ; I should say that it is as good a body of workmen as you would find anywhere in the same area.'

'And their good qualities are wholly due to your management and influence.'

'Oh no,' said Merivale quickly. 'Personally, I have very little to do with them. I do not interfere with their private affairs, though I am always ready to listen to a man's story if he brings it to me.'

Larmer shook his head, not in the least deceived or convinced by Merivale's modest words. He believed firmly that Merivale was a great man there, the pivot upon which the whole concern moved ; and in the main he was right. As the days went on, he was destined to learn much of Merivale's methods and ways, which filled him with unbounded admiration.

## CHAPTER XXII

### COMRADES

**A**BOUT eleven o'clock in the day a brougham drove out from the Bayswater Road and stopped before Freeman's house in Camberwell. In it were two persons—Gerald Agar, and his manservant, the faithful Proudfoot.

Manny had had a better night, but was still in the inner room, the noise in front distracting him beyond endurance. Adelaide took the opportunity of turning out the sitting-room, and gathering the few things belonging to the Freemans ready for removal on the morrow, supposing Manny should be able for the journey. Her face was sad as she went quietly about her work; in all the years she had been with the Freemans, she had never seen Manny so low and exhausted. She began to fear that perhaps the River House might, after all, prove the last stage on the journey. It was an intolerable thought, which gave a certain fierceness to her movements and a set expression to her face. She could not take the joy in preparation which would have been natural. Freeman,

## Comrades

before he went out that morning, had said he feared the lad would not be equal to the removal next day. Robinson, wondering much at the long night, still hung on the landing with the shawl over his cage, chirping now and again in feeble protest, but otherwise seeming to share in the prevailing gloom.

The brougham made no noise as it stopped; Adelaide happened to be shaking her duster out over the drooping geraniums, which she was distressed to observe had been forgotten, and when she saw the carriage stop, she stood quite still to observe what happened next. She supposed it must be some mistake; carriages were not common in the Camberwell Road.

Proudfoot alighted first, and walked up the two steps to the door. Adelaide was down in time to prevent him ringing the bell. Her morning had been spent in a feud against noise; Albert Edward had never known her so sharp of tongue.

'Mr. Freeman live here?' inquired Proudfoot, in his slow, northern drawl.

'Yus, but 'e ain't hin,' replied Adelaide quietly.

'His little boy? It's him we've come to see. My master, Mr. Agar, is in the carriage, and would come up if he could see him.'

Now Adelaide had heard a great deal about the other one, and she knew it was one of the chief desires of Manny's heart to see him.

## The Fighting Line

'E ain't very well this mornin'; 'ad a middlin' nite,' she replied cautiously. 'I ain't bin in at 'im for a good hour. Could the gen'leman wite a minnit, till I see 'm?'

Gerald put his head out of the carriage window, and beckoned to her. She ran out, duster in hand, to speak to him. without a thought of hesitation or shame. Adelaide feared nothing; she looked uncommonly well at the moment, too. Whatever her task or work, Adelaide was never untidy, and her face was always pleasant.

'Good-morning. My name is Agar, I am a friend of Mr. Freeman's.'

Adelaide nodded.

'I know,' she answered. 'And Manny, 'e did want ter see yer so bad. Can yer wite, sir, till I see? 'E's bin bad fer three d'ys now, never saw 'im wuss mesself.' She wiped her eyes, and her voice shook.

'I will wait, certainly; and pray, don't disturb him unless you think fit.'

Adelaide nodded, and ran back, and upstairs, two at a time. The moment her feet touched the landing, she heard Manny's shrill voice calling her.

'Adelaide, come, why is it such a long time till morning?'

'Mornin's 'ere, darlin',' she cried cheerfully, for the voice certainly sounded stronger. 'It's near

## Comrades

dinner-time; yer've bin asleep, me lud, that's what's the matter wiv yer,' she answered, as she drew up the blind and came to the bedside.

Manny was very white and drawn-looking, but his eyes were more peaceful. Adelaide, whom love had taught to read every line and sign, understood that it was over for another time, and that the pain had gone.

'I want my breakfus, an' Robinson. You didn't oughter let me lie like this. It's lazy. Where's dad?'

'Gone out; carn't be back till nite; don't know where 'e is,' she replied laconically. 'Some one else's come to see yer ludship; witin' now—guess who?'

Manny shook his head.

'The other one.'

He gave a great start, and his face flushed. 'Has he, Adelaide, really? Where is he? Can he walk? Oh, I do want to see him.'

'Dunno whether 'e kin walk, but 'e's there in the kerridge, witin' ter come hup. 'E wites just annuvver minnit, till I wash yer ludship's fice, an' whisk roun' a bit.'

Manny was distressed at the delay, but Adelaide pointed out that everything depended on first impressions, though she did not express it quite in these words. She was very quick at her task, and with her strong arms lifted the little lad and

## The Fighting Line

laid him on the couch at the window, and covered him up with a blanket and the old plaid rug, and went down for the visitor.

She was rather curious herself to see how he would get upstairs, and wondered whether the decorous Proudfoot would carry him. But that was not necessary; he merely gave his broad shoulder for his master to lean upon, which he did rather heavily, helping himself at the other side with a stout stick with a carved ivory head.

The mounting of the stairs was rather a slow process, but at last it was accomplished, and Agar entered Manny's room. The little lad's face, all flushed and glorified, was turned to him. Its angelic sweetness touched a painful chord in Gerald Agar's heart.

'Hulloa, comrade!' he cried cheerily. 'How's things, eh?'

'All right. I'm so glad you've come.'

It was a curious greeting, but there was no sense of strain or formality. The bond was there; they were old friends from the first moment of meeting.

'Tries a fellow a bit, that stair; steeper than I have at home,' said Agar, as he dropped into a chair. 'Thank you, Proudfoot. You can go down, I won't be long. Well, as the mountain wouldn't come to Mohammed, Mohammed had to come to the mountain.'

## Comrades

Manny laughed delightedly. The phrase was not new to him ; he had heard his father use it, and knew precisely what it meant.

'The mountain has no legs,' he answered demurely. 'And Mohammed has.'

'No legs,' said Agar pitifully, as he laid his hand for a brief instant on the poor spindles which scarcely made a ridge under the old plaid. 'But Mohammed's going to get legs, that's what I've come to see about.'

Manny shook his head as if the matter was not to be entertained for a moment.

'You're much nicer than I thought, but older. How old are you ?' he asked delightedly.

'Twenty-six.'

'Twenty-six—oh, my ! I'm hardly fifteen.'

'I was fifteen once, and I could run about. How long is it since you ran about ?'

'Not since it happened. I fell, you know ; but I mustn't talk about it, dad doesn't like it. It needn't have happened. Tell me what you do all day. You were lying down, weren't you, when dad was at your house ?'

'I had had a bad day.'

'I know 'em,' said Manny confidentially. 'They're—they're the mischief. You want to punch somebody's head ; Adelaide lets me punch hers, when it's very bad.'

'Bless her, she's good, isn't she ?'

## The Fighting Line

'I should think she is. They're awful mad, Albert Edward, and Mr. Jones, and Grimes the dustman, becoss she's going away with us. Mr. Jones brought her a gold brooch with real pearls in it, only she wouldn't take it. She didn't want to hurt their feelin's, because Mr. Jones is rich, and the other two ain't. She treats them all the same.'

'Do they all want to marry her?' inquired Agar, deeply interested.

'Well, Mr. Jones an' Albert Edward do. I'm not sure about Grimes; I like him best, he's so big, an' he brought me the windmill. He's the right sort.'

Agar was charmed with the lad's naïve, sweet ways, and while he encouraged him to talk, was watching him intently. He saw how spent he was, how much he needed some drastic change and care.

'Look here, comrade, we've never met before, but you trust me, don't you?'

'Yes, of course, you're the other one, only better than I thought.'

'Well, will you come with me to-day?'

'Away! Where?'

'Don't ask any questions. I want you to come, I think I can do you good.'

'But would father like it?'

'Yes, I think so, and then they can remove

## Comrades

quietly to-morrow, and when you are much better you will go down to them at Poplar.'

'But I'm to be packed with the mattress,' said Manny. 'Adelaide has arranged it all, on the greengrocer's van.'

'I'm sorry if you will be disappointed, but it's going to be a secret; can I trust you, comrade?'

'Dad does,' replied the lad quietly. 'I never go back.'

'That's all right, then I'll tell you; something's perhaps going to be done for you. Wouldn't you like to be able to walk?'

Manny could not speak, but turned his face to the open window, and in his eyes there were unutterable thoughts.

'At the 'ospital they said it was all up, dad told me.'

'But there is just one more chance. We have a friend with us, a great surgeon from abroad; he is an old friend of my dad's, and has come over for a few days. He is going down in the country with us, and he wants to see you. There are only three days, and it is the last chance. Don't you think we'd better take it, comrade?'

Manny was silent a moment, a great silence.

'Yes,' he said, 'I think we ought.'

'If your father had been at home, I should have been obliged to explain a little, but perhaps it is better not. You see, nothing is certain, and he

## The Fighting Line

might build too much on it; do you understand, comrade?'

'Yes,' answered Manny. 'I understand all right.'

'Fathers are like that,' said Agar confidentially. 'We don't have to tell them everything, they can't bear it somehow. So we'll keep the secret, you and I, until the proper times comes, and if we have to go on keeping it, comrade—well, we can, can't we?'

Manny perfectly understood, and his eyes glowed like lamps in his pale face, in their depths that haunting sweetness which sank into Agar's heart.

'It's our secret, comrade, yours and mine,' he went on. 'While Adelaide—her name is Adelaide, isn't it?—is getting you ready, I'll write a letter to your father, just to say I've taken you away for a few days from the bustle of removal, and that you'll come back presently, when they get settled down at the new house. Will that do?'

'Splendidly, and will you tell him we're comrades?'

Agar nodded, and rose to call Proudfoot, who stood just outside the door.

'Has the ambulance come, Proudfoot?'

'Yes, sir,' he answered, and in his turn called Adelaide, who you may be sure was not very far away.

Agar explained his errand and intention, and

## Comrades

at the same time pointed to the small ambulance-waggon that had followed up the carriage, and now stood in the centre of an admiring throng at the door.

Adelaide, though awed by these high-handed proceedings, was by no means sure that she ought to allow them.

'I think we should wite, sir, till 'is favver comes 'ome. 'E mite not like it, an' be gettin' at me.'

Agar laughed.

'We'll risk it, I think. Get him ready while I write a letter to Mr. Freeman. And I promise you, my good girl, that no harm shall come to your darling, and that you shall see him as soon as possible.'

'Want ter go, sonny?' inquired Adelaide, regarding Manny as the final court of appeal

'W'y, of course,' replied Manny cheerfully. 'Ain't he my comrade? It's sure to be all rite.'

Adelaide said no more. She knew well that Manny's departure would considerably lessen the work and anxiety of the morrow, but her heart was sad and sore; she did not hold with great changes, she was true blue at heart. When the ambulance, with its steady horse, and neat nurse inside ready to take every care of the invalid, moved slowly and smoothly away from the door, followed by the brougham, Adelaide sat down disconsolately and watered her apron with tears.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### TÊTE-À-TÊTE

FREEMAN had dressed himself with considerable care that day and gone out early. He went down to Poplar first, arriving at Larmer's works about eleven o'clock. As he passed the gates, without remark, being quite well known to the porter, he suddenly remembered that it was the day Larmer was expected at the works.

'Has he come, Peter?' he stepped back to ask. 'The master, I mean.'

'Mister Larmer, sir, yus—a-goin' roun' the plice wiv Mr. Merivale; a likely chap. 'E's got an eye in 'is 'ead, 'e 'as. Wonder wot'll be the hupshot.'

'Then I can't see Mr. Merivale, I suppose?'

'Dunno, sir,' said the man, shaking his head.

At the moment the pair appeared at one of the shed doors, and Merivale waved his hand to Freeman, whom he was surprised to see there at such an hour. He did not know that Freeman was in a strait betwixt two, that he wanted a word of advice.

## Tête-à-Tête

Freeman moved forward, and Merivale introduced him to Larmer. The few words Merivale had spoken concerning Freeman had interested Larmer, and he remarked that he was happy to make his acquaintance.

'I have undertaken a big thing, Mr. Freeman,' he said genially. 'A man does not learn a new business easily at thirty-five, but I am under a good master.'

'Yes,' said Freeman steadily, 'you are.'

'I am happy to hear you are coming to be near us, Mr. Freeman. I shall have the benefit of a double advice sometimes, when I find myself at a loss among new elements.'

'But I am not on your side,' observed Freeman bluntly. 'I'm all for the rights of labour.'

'So am I,' laughed Larmer. 'Well, shall we go on, Merivale?'

Freeman felt himself dismissed. He wanted a word with Merivale, but it was impossible to obtain it there. Merivale's own thoughts were much occupied with other matters, and he failed to observe anything unusual about his friend.

'How's Manny?' he asked, as Freeman turned to go. 'Better, I hope, and getting ready for to-morrow.'

'He's not very well, George,' replied Freeman, as he walked away.

He looked at his watch as he passed out into

## The Fighting Line

the street. It was not yet twelve ; he had another hour and a half on his hands before he need keep an appointment he had made. He used part of it in taking a walk to the River House. It was in the possession of a charwoman, who regarded his intrusion with disfavour. The place was dismantled, miserable, unhomelike. He turned away disgusted, with the feeling that he was unwelcome everywhere.

Perhaps this hurt, sore feeling, existing entirely in his own imagination, helped to accentuate the warmth of the welcome he received at a small house in Ebury Street, where he had a luncheon appointment at half past one.

It was the house of Harold Beltravers, M.P., and Freeman had been invited to a *tête-à-tête* luncheon by his wife. He was not aware, however, that they would be quite alone. He had already spent a good many hours in that bijou house, which he had generally found full of people. Lady Beltravers had often remarked in his hearing that 'solitude was one of the unendurable things of life.'

He was shown up to the drawing-room, a long, narrow, double apartment on the first floor. It was simply but exquisitely furnished in subdued old-rose tints, which admirably suited the complexion of the mistress, had been chosen by her for that reason.

## Tête-à-Tête

Judy was there, an alluring vision in a white gown, sitting in the depths of a great, low chair, from which she did not rise.

'How do you do? It is good of you to cheer up poor little me. I'm feeling low and miserable. I want sympathy, not bracing, to-day—remember that.'

Freeman did not know exactly what she meant. In the place where he came from, moods and fancies did not receive such minute attention. It was the big elementary things of life that mattered.

'I am sorry you are feeling bad, Lady Beltravers,' he said bluntly.

'I am Judy to my friends,' she said plaintively. 'How can a man offer sympathy to Lady Beltravers? He might to Judy.'

Freeman's face flushed a little, and he moved awkwardly back. He wanted to pull up the blind to let the sun in upon the soft, seductive atmosphere. But he was not strong enough to obtrude his own likes in such a place.

'It's cooler outside to-day,' he said lamely. 'I've been down Poplar way this morning. Did you know that Mr. Larmer had come back? He's there to-day.'

Yes, I know. He's a sort of hundred-and-first connection of mine, but I don't take any interest in him now. The unfortunate taint in

## The Fighting Line

his blood is showing itself in him. It's more than a bar-sinister between us.'

'What do you mean?' asked Freeman interestedly.

'What I say. We've got religion on one side of our family. It's a hereditary disease that asserts itself at inconvenient intervals. Janet Romaine has got it a little, but it sits not so badly upon her. But Percy Larmer! it would be killingly funny, if it were not so tragic.'

He said nothing, then she rambled on:

'Come and sit down here and tell me every single thing you've been doing since I saw you last, and why you have not looked near me for five whole days. I've been disconsolate, and more than usually aggravating to my husband in consequence. I really believe he's gone out this morning, wondering whether he had got any ground for a separation.'

Freeman still kept silence. At the moment the door was opened, and the man-servant announced that luncheon was served. Then he understood that he was the only guest. Judy rose and stood expectantly, he moved awkwardly forward and offered his arm. She smiled as she laid her slim hand upon it. Side by side they moved down the narrow staircase; it was very narrow, and the whole house was smaller than his own in the Camberwell Road. But it was all so different, being

## Tête-à-Tête

a thing of beauty, from attic to basement. Judy could create that atmosphere wherever she went. Yet its atmosphere, flower-laden, quiet, remote from the world, singularly oppressed Freeman. He wished that he had not come. He knew that he had no right there, that he was wasting time to provide a new sensation for a woman of the world; and yet, so cunningly had she got him in her toils, he had no will when she bade him come.

About three o'clock a closed brougham drove up quickly to Lady Beltravers' door, and a lady alighted from it.

'Your mistress in, Tipson?' she said quickly.

'Yes, Miss Romaine, but she's engaged. My orders was to admit nobody.'

'Who is with her?'

The man hesitated a moment.

'Mr. Freeman, Miss Romaine.'

'I'll go up,' said Janet quietly. 'Where are they?'

'In the drawing-room, miss. Coffee has just gone up.'

Janet's face was a little white and set as she ran quickly up the stairs. She was taking a liberty in another woman's house, but she had known Judy all her life, and she did not care. This sort of thing had got to be stopped, and she would stop it if she could. She gave a little smart

## The Fighting Line

tap at the door, and immediately opened it. The faint, mingled odour of fragrant coffee and cigarette smoke met her on the threshold.

'I am not at home, Tipson,' called out Judy's voice, in accents of sharp reproof.

'It is I, Judy. Tipson told me that at the door, honest man, so absolve him from blame. Oh, how do you do, Mr. Freeman?'

He rose from the end of the couch, where he had been sitting with his hostess.

'Mr. Freeman and I are discussing important questions, Janet. We did not want to be disturbed.'

'I've got three-quarters of an hour to spare before I fetch mamma to the Barings,' answered Janet quietly. 'And I am going to spend it here. May I get myself a cup of coffee?'

Lady Beltravers shrugged her shoulders, and shot a side glance at Freeman. He stepped forward to the coffee-tray, seeking to be of some use. But he had never learnt the little courtesies suitable to a lady's boudoir, and he only succeeded in looking awkward.

'I am glad to meet you here for one reason, Mr. Freeman,' said Janet, lifting her quiet eyes to his face. 'I have just seen your little boy——'

'My boy! Where? Have you been to Camberwell?'

## Tête-à-Tête

She shook her head.

'No, he is at Mr. Agar's house in Connaught Place. I have been lunching there.'

'It's impossible. I left him in bed this morning, too ill to take much notice of anything,' said Freeman stupidly.

'He is there, I assure you,' said Janet, with a nod. 'Mr. Gerald Agar went to Camberwell himself to fetch him.'

'But what is the meaning of it?' asked Freeman, with a dull resentment which secretly pleased Janet. 'He did not ask my leave.'

'As to that, I don't know. If he didn't, he ought to have done. There is a friend of Gerald's there, Judy, Professor von Leipmann from Vienna. Probably, he wished him to see the boy, Mr. Freeman. I can assure you that Manny, at least, seemed happy. I understand that you are moving to the River House to-morrow. It will be better for him to be out of it.'

'It was a high-handed proceeding,' reiterated Freeman, 'whatever its motive. And, for the first time, the girl in charge has been careless of her duty.'

'I question that. There is probably some quite simple explanation. I did not ask any questions, I was pleased to see him there, looking so wonderfully well, much better than when I saw him at Camberwell last Monday.'

## The Fighting Line

'It was very good of you to go down,' said Freeman lamely.

'Oh, that was my pleasure,' said Janet lightly. 'Don't you think you should step round to Connaught Place, now you are so near, and find out the state of matters for yourself?'

Before he could reply, Lady Beltravers intervened, not angrily, but with an indolent smile.

'Is this my house or yours, Janet? Mr. Freeman must think it odd that you come here and drum-major me like this.'

Janet did not wince.

'Mr. Freeman will probably think the right thing, Judy—at least, I hope so,' she replied bravely, but there was a high note of strain in her voice, which indicated the inner disturbance.

Freeman turned to Judy.

'I think I'll go round to Connaught House, as Miss Romaine suggests, and see what they mean, if your ladyship will excuse me,' he said, a trifle awkwardly.

Judy winced at 'her ladyship,' but suppressed her smile.

'If what she says is true, I hope you'll give it to them. A high-handed proceeding, I call it, an unwarrantable interference with liberty and private affairs. But the Agars are like that, and they want talking to. Must you go? Good-bye

## Tête-à-Tête

then, till Sunday! I shall pick you up at Hyde Park Corner at three.'

Freeman murmured something which Janet did not catch, he bowed to her without meeting her eyes, and passed out of the room.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE APPEAL

THE door had scarcely closed before Judy threw herself back on the couch and burst into a peal of laughter. Janet did not even smile.

'Judy Beltravers, I'm ashamed of you. You are a horrid little wretch !' she said at last, with a desperate note in her voice. She was very angry ; she never remembered having been so angry in the whole course of her life.

'Go on, Jen, it suits you. Oh, you're not the saint they take you for ! You can be quite vulgarly upset. Perhaps you learned the art down East,' said Judy, in a mocking voice.

'A horrid little wretch,' repeated Janet, steady in her voice. 'So long as you confine yourself to people like the Van Vorsts, however much we hate it, we say nothing ; but this man is different.'

'Oh, he is ; he is delicious, Janet, the last thing in sensations. You get down to the bedrock with him ; he says what he means, and means what he

## The Appeal

says. It's most refreshing ; it ought to be good for me, too, you have so often told me how artificial I am.'

'It is neither good for you nor him. With you, I am not much concerned ; if you have a heart at all, you can take care of it. But you have no right to make a plaything of him.'

'Oh, he's not in love with me, Jen, not in the least—yet, at least ; and I'll try and keep him in bounds. He's only studying me, the type of a class they want to crush out of existence. I assure you, I am of extreme use to him, and he, of course, amuses me immensely.'

'I hardly see where the amusement comes in. He's so serious ; he has no small talk, he is only in earnest about the things that matter.'

'The things that matter !' repeated Judy musingly. 'What are they, or are there really any ? I doubt it. If I had not been so fortunate as to spend that enchanting hour in the Isle of Dogs, I might have suspected you of being in love with him yourself. Why don't you confine yourself to your own concerns, Jen ?'

'This is my concern. I wish you would think about Harold sometimes, Judy. I saw him yesterday, looking the picture of dejection.'

'I assure you his looks have nothing to do with me. If he chooses to be a wet blanket, and to disapprove of everything, positively everything I

## The Fighting Line

think or say, how can I be decent to him? No flower expands without the sun.'

'True,' murmured Janet. 'You might try to shine a little on him. Believe me, the experiment might be worth making.'

'He's so dull,' pleaded Judy. 'So horribly, deadly dull, and dulness is the cardinal sin; we can forgive anything but that. Now, this big, handsome Socialist is serious, but never dull. You never know what he will say next, and he expresses the primeval passions in primeval words.'

Janet did not like the words. Regarding Judy intently, she wondered how far the thing had really gone.

'Where are you going on Sunday?' she asked severely.

'I really don't know why you should put me through a catechism, and why I should permit it, but I'll tell you. We're only going to the Star and Garter for tea, and for a spin in the country afterwards. He has never seen Richmond; would you believe that?'

Janet sat silent, sipping her coffee, pondering how she could stop this affair altogether. She thought of Merivale, of the little lad, of the Agars, all the agencies she could muster, but none of them seemed adequate.

'It's horrible, Judy!—perfectly horrible!' she said with a little stamp of her foot. 'If you knew

## The Appeal

as much about the East End as I do, you would understand that the thing it wants most in the world is to be let alone. Half the evils it suffers from have been created from the outside. They did not exist till it began to be exploited by agitators and legislators with an axe to grind; by faddists, and by women like Arabella and you.'

'Much obliged,' said Judy imperturbably.

'As far as Freeman is concerned, you are only upsetting him, making him unfit for the work he has to do.'

'I assure you, you flatter me too much. The piquant flavour is that I can't make any impression on him. He's always harping on the same old string—the wickedness of the rich, and the wrongs of the poor. You looked as black as thunder when you came in, Janet, but I assure you, you disturbed nothing more entertaining than the usual diatribe. Is it really true that the Agars have taken away the boy, or did you invent it on the spot, to get him out?'

'It is quite true. Gerald went down with an ambulance this morning, hoping to find Freeman at home—where he ought to have been. Seeing the boy is so ill, and realising that something might be done to alleviate his pain, he took him away. Freeman may resent it, but he can't get away from the goodness of the act.'

## The Fighting Line

'It was cheek, and I hope he'll walk into the Agars. Oh! I can't stand that lot, Janet Romaine; and what our family is coming to, I can't think. It's a pretty good thing there isn't a male left in it, I think. We're effete, and the sooner we drop out the better. We're all faddists, extremists, degenerate, bar me.'

Janet smiled, but the words struck home. Four families in the connection, and not one male heir. It represented a vast amount of money and other heritage, which would pass out of the records of England for ever. She wondered why, and her inner thought gave a deepened seriousness to her expression.

'That gets at you,' said Judy, with a little nod. 'You hadn't thought of it in that light. If the Almighty approved of this sort of thing, the sort of thing you and the Agars and Harold, in a mild way, and Aunt Honoria, all go in for, surely He would have perpetuated it in the ordinary way. It's a curious commentary on the proceedings, isn't it?'

Janet made no reply.

Judy leaned forward, her pretty face puckered into momentary gravity.

'See here, Janet, supposing it turned out that, as just possibly it might—that you are all wrong, and I right after all? You see it's a bit presumptuous on your part to try to upset the

## The Appeal

existing order of things, the order that was first ordained. For you can't get away from the fact that there were always hewers of wood and drawers of water. You're wasting the best years of your life. How you will regret it ten years from now! We are only young once, and we want all the fun we can get.'

'Won't you promise me something, Judy, for the sake of auld lang syne?' asked Janet, bending eagerly forward with a pleading look on her sweet face.

'Not Freeman, Jen; don't make big eyes at me about it. He's too interesting. I want to turn the last page; he's so reserved, he only lets me read a line at a time.'

'And when you've got to the last line, you'll close the book, and send it back to its proper niche, eh?'

'Why, of course, isn't that what we do with all books? And if they've been specially interesting or entertaining, we have a memory, that's all.'

'It may be a serious matter for him.'

'It won't be, he's a strong man. Really, Jen, you overstep the bounds,' said Judy, rising to shake out her voluminous white skirts. 'Between relatives much is permissible, but this is a bit—a bit——'

'It's quite true,' said Janet quietly. 'I wish

## The Fighting Line

you'd promise me, Judy, do ! It's a thing I really want.'

'I have wanted a lot of things and not got them,' said Judy plaintively.

'But this is something for some one else. Leave Freeman alone. Send him a note, and tell him you can't keep the appointment on Sunday.'

'Then he'll know who has done it. He'll think you're my keeper.'

'He won't, and even if he did, what about it ? We need not concern ourselves about what he thinks.'

'Well, I'll promise after Sunday. I'm going down to Henley, to Van Vorst's houseboat, anyway, for a week. That's really what's the matter with Harold. If you could direct your attention to Van Vorst, you might do him a better service. He's seen Freeman ; rather likes him, and knows how safe he is.'

Judy was still chaffing. Janet shook her head, bade her good afternoon, and left the house. After all, what had she accomplished ? Nothing. Perhaps she had been wiser to have kept away. But Merivale had asked her to do what she could ; they had met accidentally a few days before, and he had complained bitterly of the change in his friend. It was for Merivale's sake that Janet had spoken. Probably her motive had not been single enough.

## The Appeal

She admitted it with a sigh as she drove back to Cromwell Road for her mother.

Meanwhile Freeman, in resentful mood, had walked across the Park to Connaught Place. He had seen a good deal of Lady Beltravers in the last two weeks, and he knew that the experience had not done him any good. He felt himself unsettled ; all his interest had strayed from that which ought to have been his first concern. Even his ministry to the little lad had been half-hearted. It was this guilty feeling of self-reproach which gave the peculiar sting to his resentment. He arrived at Connaught Place in fighting trim. He was admitted at once, and taken up to the room where he found Manny, full of wonder, among the flowers. He was quite alone, and had been asleep, lying on Agar's own couch. When he saw his father enter, the flush of pleasure leaped high to his face.

' Oh, dad, isn't it wonderful ! ' he cried, stretching out his hands. ' It was the other one ; he came and took me away.'

He stopped rather shortly, half-perplexed, missing something in his father's face ; the tenderness which he was accustomed to see there was lacking for the first time.

' What is it, dad ? Have I vexed you ? '

' You haven't, lad ; but—but don't you think it is a bit off ? '

## The Fighting Line

'What, dad? He's been awfully good. I'm to have this room, and to-morrow we're going in the country, the real country. I've never seen it, dad. And that lovely carriage with the red cross on it is to fetch me. Did you get the letter the other one wrote, to tell you all about it? Adelaide got him the paper and the pen and ink to write it while she was getting me ready.'

Freeman shook his head.

'I haven't been home. Somebody told me you were here, and I came right on. I didn't believe it; you see, I never thought you'd desert your old dad.'

A cry of inexpressible pain broke from the boy's lips. The words had wounded deeper than he thought.

'Tell them to come,' he cried desperately; 'I want to go back; you'll carry me, won't you, dad?'

Freeman did not move.

'No, no. They can make the experiment now they've begun it. You'll like it all right here, Manny, when you get used to it.'

'But you don't like it, dad,' said the little lad, with the same pained look in his eyes. His lips must be closed, the secret he and the other one shared must not pass them. They had decreed that fathers could not be told everything, and Manny himself had promised; but it was very

## The Appeal

hard. Something had come between him and his father.

Freeman, sitting silent and sore by his side, had not the faintest idea of the acute mental pain the boy was suffering. It suited his mood at the moment to play the injured parent, whose long service and devotion had been unappreciated. It was an unworthy attitude, and part of the harm Judith Beltravers had wrought already.

'So they're going to take you to the country, Manny, and we've got to do our moving to-morrow ourselves, eh? What will Adelaide say?'

'She doesn't mind, and I'll be back soon; but I don't think I ought to go, really. I'll tell them you don't like it.'

'But I do like it; at least, I don't mind. I mustn't be selfish. And, of course, they're very rich, they'll be able to give you all sorts of things I can't.'

'Oh, dad!'

The anguish in the boy's voice moved Freeman to a sudden passion of remorse. Tears sprang to his eyes; he stooped and gathered the frail figure to his breast in a rush of tenderness.

'Never mind, old chappie, something's out of joint with your old dad. He didn't mean it; hit him hard, he deserves it. He's a mean, miserable beast.'

But that Manny would not have. Peace was

## The Fighting Line

restored between them, and when Freeman left the house, without having seen anybody but Manny, he left no cloud behind. The cloud was on his own soul.

'They meant well,' he muttered to himself. 'But they've taken away the ballast. Now, what'll happen next?'

## CHAPTER XXV

### ON THE TERRACE

JANET drove back to Cromwell Road, took her mother to the Barings' house in Lowndes Square, then, having permission, went herself to the House of Commons, where she sent in a message to Harold Beltravers.

It was some time before he came to her, but in the interval she amused herself watching the guests arriving, for many hosts were giving tea on the Terrace. She saw Harold cross the vista of the hall before he observed her, and had opportunity to note his altered looks.

Harold was not a handsome man; he had a short, squat figure, and a square, determined face, which indicated a somewhat stubborn temper. He was not quick to anger, but once roused, that anger was not easily allayed. Janet wondered just how far Judy had tried him, or how he felt regarding her. She had not come with any idea of questioning him—Beltravers was the last man who would invite or tolerate such a liberty—she had business with him on her own account; she

## The Fighting Line

wanted him to give prizes at a gathering of East-End children in which Mrs. Macbride had interested her, and she knew him well enough to feel assured that he would not resent her arriving as an unbidden guest. He smiled when he saw her, a smile of genuine pleasure, which considerably brightened his face.

'I hope I have not interrupted anything important or interesting, Harold,' she said, as they shook hands. 'I left mother at the Barings'. She excused me from going in. I want something from you, of course.'

'I could guess that,' he replied. 'Well, come down and have some tea. The Terrace is going to be very full to-day. There's a big Colonial party expected, but I dare say we'll get a corner.'

Janet nodded, well pleased; it was what she wanted. She liked Harold Beltravers very well, though she had never been able to understand the attraction Judy could have for him; she was so frivolous, so consummately and avowedly selfish, so careless of all his interests. The marriage had been a mistake; she supposed that Harold had long ago discovered it, and regretted it. But in this she was wrong. Janet had learned a good deal in the past year, but of the inner working of this man's mind, nothing at all.

'We don't see much of you now; the House is very engrossing. I should not like to marry a

## On the Terrace

member of Parliament,' she said, as they went down the narrow stairs to the Terrace.

' You might get used to it, even if you did not take any interest in it,' he said drily. ' Some women are deeply interested. There are only the two ways of it.'

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask which Judy had chosen, but reflecting that it would be an entirely superfluous question, she refrained. They emerged at the moment full on the cool terrace facing the river, on which the sun lay in a flood of gold.

' It's lovely here, the only cool place in London,' said Janet, with a little sigh of content. ' Doesn't Judy like it ? '

' She has not been here this season,' he answered. ' This way, Janet, I see a vacant table.'

It was far up, a little removed from the gayer portion of the throng, but it did not matter ; Janet had not come either to see or be seen, but to talk to the man at her side.

' We've only met once, I think, since you came up from the East End,' observed Harold, as he set her chair. ' How do you take the West after it, eh ? Your mother seems uncommonly relieved to have you back.'

' She's got me back in the body, Harold, but not in the spirit,' replied Janet, with an odd little smile.

' That's the trouble about the East End. It's like

## The Fighting Line

the House, it weaves a sort of spell over one. I may as well get to my business at once. Will you come down to Poplar on the eleventh, and preside at a flower-service for the children? A big thing; I want you especially.'

Beltravers looked surprised. 'It's hardly in my line of things, is it?'

'But it might be. Do say you'll come, only half an hour's drive—less if you let Judy bring you in the motor.'

His face instantly hardened.

'That isn't a likely contingency,' he said, with a sudden rasping note in his voice. 'Even if she were good enough to invite me to ride in the motor, I shouldn't accept it. It isn't mine.'

There was no doubt about the bitterness of his tone. Janet bent over her teacup, momentarily at a loss.

'Then you'll come some other way. I'll drive you, if you like; but do say we may expect you. Somebody ought to recognise that work down there. I'd ask Uncle Franklin, only I daren't; I know how occupied he is the whole of this month.'

'I'm a poor substitute for Agar, Janet, a poor speaker, a nonentity; but if you want me, I'll come.'

'Thank you very much. I won't even attempt to refute these hard things you are saying about yourself. Uncle Franklin shall refute them for

## On the Terrace

me; you know how high his expectations of you are.'

A quick, eager look leaped for a moment in Beltravers' eyes; Janet noticed it even while seeming to see nothing. She had learned to observe in silence, and she wanted to know a little more about Judy's husband.

'There's danger in being too modest, Harold,' she said quietly. 'Modesty, not being a plant that grows to large dimensions in these days, is apt to be trampled on. Now, you are the last man to be trampled on.'

He gave his moustache a tug, and beneath it Janet saw the hard, somewhat set line of his mouth.

'It's what I exist for, in the estimation of some—my wife, for instance.'

'Oh, no,' said Janet feebly. 'Don't say that, Harold; Judy is foolish, but shrewd enough. She doesn't think you a weak man.'

'She thinks me outside the pale then. Have you seen her lately?'

'This afternoon.'

'What was she doing?'

Janet hesitated a moment.

'Well, she was speaking to a Socialist when I saw her, a man of the name of Freeman.'

He laughed.

'Her latest addition to her gallery of portraits. I've seen the fellow; I like him rather, he has the

## The Fighting Line

merit of sincerity. I wonder what he thinks of her. Have you met the Van Vorsts yet ? '

' No, you know my mother does not know them.'

' Will not, you mean. The motor is Van Vorst's, Janet.'

Janet's face slightly paled.

' Then you ought not to allow Judy to ride in it.'

He shrugged his shoulders.

' Say it again. I ought not to allow my wife to ride in it. Will you tell me how I am to prevent it? '

' If she were my wife I should prevent it,' said Janet, and she set her small mouth in a firm, long curve. ' She should understand that I have to be obeyed. You have been too meek with Judy all along, Harold. I hate to say this, to be speaking about it at all, it is horrible ; but you opened the subject, and perhaps it won't do any harm. I am very fond of Judy ; I like you, we all do, and think you are far too good for her. And I know her far better than you, she lived with us for three years, remember. She wants a master, Harold, and you have to make her understand that you are going to be that master.'

' It's not my notion of treating the woman one has married,' he said.

' But one's notions have to be altered to suit circumstances,' replied Janet.

' Tell me how you would proceed in this case,' he asked,

## On the Terrace

Janet looked at him with a half-smiling, half-serious look.

'Are you asking me for advice, Harold? I'm only a girl.'

'But you've got common-sense and right feeling, all the things that Judy lacks, and you can hold your tongue.'

'I can do that, certainly,' admitted Janet. 'I've kept my eyes open down East, Harold, and I can pass you on my observations concerning things matrimonial. They pursue the primeval plan there. It is brute force that counts.'

'I know that; but how could the principle be made applicable to present circumstances?'

'Judy is a little savage. You must master her, Harold, that's all.'

He shook his head.

'A man can't do that to—to the only woman he cares about.'

His tone vibrated with the passion of his soul. Janet had difficulty to keep back her tears. She had hoped that he had become indifferent, too; it was the only way to peace in Vanity Fair.

'Look, Janet! there she is, with Van Vorst too. The Colonials are coming in. Now, don't you call that a scandal! She didn't expect to see me here. This very morning I made a sort of ultimatum to her, and this is her comment upon it.'

Janet was angry, too angry to speak. She stood

## The Fighting Line

up, however, in order to see the man who had upset the peace of her cousin, and when she saw him, her anger burned more hotly than before. She put her hand on Beltravers' arm.

'Harold,' she said, in a low voice, 'I should go up to Judy now, right in front of these impossible people, and take her away.'

'She would laugh in my face.'

'She would not. You can do it. Do it now, and I will slip away; she must not see me, or know I have had any hand in it. Do you hear, Harold? Go now!'

'It might make a scene. Judy is capable of anything.'

'There will be no scene, I tell you. I know Judy better than you,' she said feverishly. 'It is the only way; your last chance, perhaps, don't lose it.'

He took a step forward. Janet's eyes burned in her head. She walked rapidly away, to the surprise of the waitress who had just brought their tray, and she did not once look back; she was too loyal for that, and vulgar curiosity did not appeal to her. This was one of the big things of life, a bit of its real tragedy. She could only pray, as she hurriedly left the precincts of the House, that it might end well.

Beltravers moved quietly through the throng and press of the gay crowd. Several spoke to him,

## On the Terrace

and wondered that no answer came. His white face, his set, strong mouth, the look in his eyes, made them wonder what had occurred. At the members' entrance, a few yards from the long table where the crowd was thickest, and where Judy was, Agar met him full in the face.

Agar came very little to the Terrace; the gayer side of Parliamentary life did not much appeal to him, and he had no women-kind to make it enjoyable for him.

'Hulloa, Harold!' he said genially. 'We don't often meet here. But what's up?'

'A moment, sir,' said Beltravers quietly, yet in a tense voice which instantly revealed to the other the strain under which he was labouring. He looked forward and saw Judy, saw also whom she was with, and understood.

Harold pushed through the crowd, creating some little surprise. Judy had moved to the side of the Terrace stone balustrade with the South African millionaire. Beltravers took no notice of him, but touched his wife's arm.

'Come!' he said.

'Come where?' she asked, with a little laugh which, however, quickly quenched when she saw the expression of his face. 'You must have gone mad, Harold, to order me like this. Do you hear, Mr. Van Vorst, the last thing in matrimonial sensations.'

## The Fighting Line

Van Vorst gave a small, crackling laugh, but his massive face showed obvious discomfort.

'Go away, Harold, and don't make an idiot of yourself and me,' she said, in a low voice. 'We can settle up at home, quietly. I won't have a scene; do you hear? Vulgarity is unpardonable.'

'Come home,' he repeated. 'I mean what I say, Judy. Mr.—this—this gentleman will excuse you,' he added, with a note in his voice keen enough to pierce the tough hide of Van Vorst's sensitiveness.

'You are very rude to your wife, sir,' he said, somewhat feebly.

Beltravers simply turned his back upon him.

'Come home,' he said to Judy again.

'And if I don't?'

'Then I will make a scene, as you call it,' he warned her quietly. 'They will never forget it; I shall make an example here and now of you and this person.'

Judy, in no doubt that her husband had gone mad, yet compelled to secret admiration for his courage and bearing, gave her white shoulders a little shrug.

'Something has happened, friend, to upset his equilibrium; I had better go. Pray make excuses for me to your friends, and tell them I am urgently required at home.'

'You can tell them the truth, if you like,' said

## On the Terrace

Beltravers quietly. 'That an Englishman has occasionally some regard for his wife's name, even if she has none for her own.'

He turned his back on Van Vorst and looked at Judy. Her colour was high, her lips rebelliously moving, but she went.

Several curious pairs of eyes followed them. It was but a momentary ripple on the surface, too slight to cause much remark. Three or four only understood the significance of the incident. Among those was Franklin Agar; he smiled a little as he observed Van Vorst's discomfiture.

'Harold is waking up,' he said.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE ULTIMATUM

ONCE free from observation, Judy's anger mounted high. She could scarcely take time to get beyond the precincts of the House to give vent. She walked several paces in front of her husband, her head in the air; he following quietly, with unaltered looks. He did not know what would be the end of this matter, but he had vindicated himself, and was prepared to drive his ultimatum home.

'I can get home myself, supposing I ever go there,' she said, stopping on the pavement outside the door. A long line of carriages waited, among them the smart automobile, with the yellow-faced liveries, that had brought Lady Beltravers to the House. Her face was very white now, with the whiteness of an inward fury.

His answer was to signal a near hansom and open the doors.

'Get in,' he said shortly.

She did not know what had come to her, but she felt she had no alternative but to obey. She

## The Ultimatum

stepped in, Harold followed her, and gave the address in Ebury Street. Then she laughed, a shrill, mirthless laugh.

'Are you going to kill me?' she asked, with a side glance at his hard profile.

'It would be the simplest way out of the difficulty,' he replied. 'And creatures like you, useless and dangerous, should be put out of existence.'

'Fine sentiments from a husband to a wife,' she said viciously. 'Harold, have you lost all the little sense you ever had?'

'No, I have regained it,' he answered.

'Are you going to lock me up, then? It is too funny, quite mediæval,' she said hysterically. 'I really believe I am afraid.'

He made no answer, but sat back in the hansom and closed his eyes. She had thus an opportunity of observing his expression and look. She was surprised to see the lines on his face, and how grey was the hair on his temples. Yet he was quite young, not yet thirty.

'What a fool I was to marry you, Harold Beltravers! What an utter fool! If only I had waited!'

'You might have sold yourself to better advantage, doubtless,' he said, with frank brutality. 'I, too, may have repented the bargain, but it has to be adhered to all the same. You understand that?'

'I don't know what you are making all this fuss

## The Fighting Line

about,' she said pettishly. 'I only amuse myself, as hundreds of other women do, and we are so frightfully poor; I hate poverty. If you want me to be a model wife, you should get rich, Harold. There are ways; I have often tried to show you, but you have always been too pig-headed to listen. I don't know how I married into such a crowd. Janet Romaine, Franklin Agar, Aunt Honoria, and now Percy Larmer. Seems to me, half the world has gone suddenly mad.'

'You are speaking of your own crowd, to which you are alien,' he replied quietly. 'They disapprove of you even more completely than I do.'

'Why didn't you marry Janet Romaine?' she asked viciously. 'She would have been all I am not.'

'Unfortunately I met you first,' he said unguardedly.

The words, uttered carelessly, went home. Her colour rose again, and she nipped the palms of her hands, where they lay upon her lap.

'She's a cat! these demure women always are. She's just as fond of fun as I am, only she calls it by a different name. All humbug, this East-End business. It's new sensation she's after, too. She's in love with a man down there. I can revenge myself on her by telling Aunt Elizabeth all about it.'

'You have made mischief enough in one house,

## The Ultimatum

Judy. I'd advise you to keep out of other people's business,' he replied ; and at the moment they came to their own door.

'It's only five o'clock,' she said, as she passed up the steps. 'What's to happen next ? And I haven't had any tea.'

Beltravers paid the cabman, and opened the door with his latchkey. The boy in buttons, dozing on the hall-seat, jumped up in surprise. It was unusual for his master and mistress to appear home at that hour.

'Tell them to bring your mistress some tea upstairs,' said Beltravers, and opening the dining-room door motioned his wife in.

It was a long, narrow room, divided into two portions, the inner one Beltravers used as a study when in the house. Judy walked in there, and flung herself on the leather-covered couch.

'Now, perhaps you will explain the meaning of all this. Do you think I am going to submit tamely to this scandalous treatment ?'

Beltravers sat down on the corner of the writing-table and looked at her without speaking. The intensity of his gaze, the curious depth of its expression, compelled her to meet it. She was no fool, and she saw that the limit of her husband's endurance had been reached, also that his determination had become a thing to reckon with. Surprise mingled with her rage and con-

## The Fighting Line

sternation, because he had been so long patient that she had begun to despise him.

‘Well, I see you’ve got more things to say—dreadful things,’ she said pettishly. ‘Perhaps it would relieve you to hit me. What do you want me to do?’

‘I have got my mind made up, Judy. I will take you to Tranmere to-morrow.’

‘Tranmere!’ she echoed shrilly. ‘But I won’t go.’

Tranmere was a little property on the Surrey Hills which had come to him from his mother. An old, dull house, situated among enchanting scenery, but remote from everywhere, and for those without resource, ineffably dull.

‘Do you think I shall stop in Tranmere? If you take me ten times over, I shall escape,’ she said feverishly. ‘And you would be a fool, anyhow, to try that remedy. It’s the very place to get into mischief, there’s nothing else to do.’

‘Then I shall pair, and take you there myself, or abroad; but go out of London you shall.’

‘It will be bad for your career,’ she said plaintively. ‘And I don’t want your company, I assure you. I’ve had enough of it.’

When he remained silent she looked up at him a trifle pleadingly.

‘I really think you’ve overstepped the bounds this time, Harold. I may have been a little foolish.



'DO YOU THINK I AM GOING TO SUBMIT TAMELY TO THIS  
SCANDALOUS TREATMENT ?



## The Ultimatum

I loathe Van Vorst quite as much as you do, but he is useful. If only you could awaken to the fact, he might even be useful to you.'

'I cannot conceive of any circumstances under which I could make use of Mr. Van Vorst,' he replied frigidly.

'You are ultra-prudish, or proud, or whatever you call it, and it's suicidal in a man of your position. Why, you have everything to make; why not take the easiest way?'

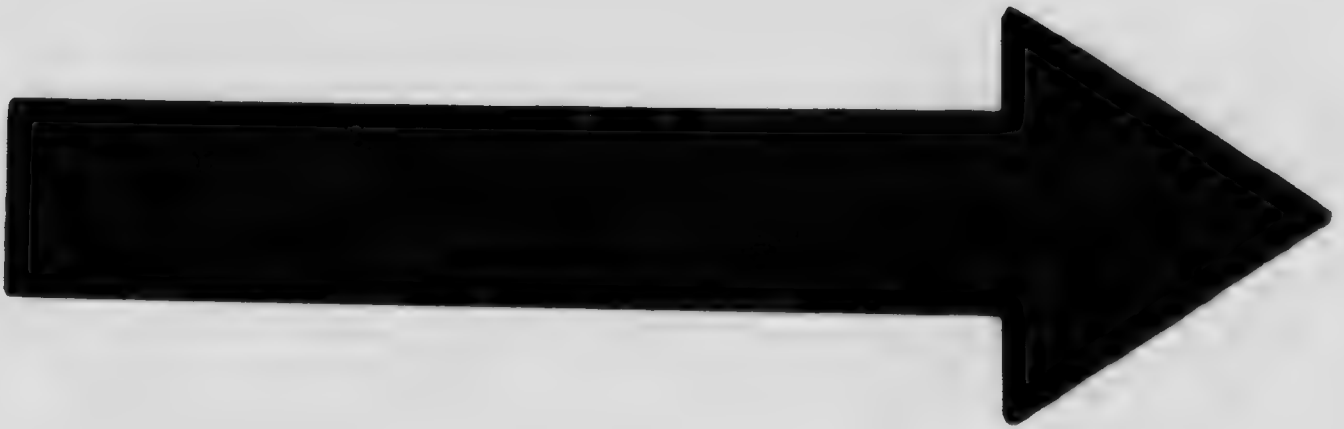
'Because I have some shreds of honour and decency left. I tell you, Judy, we have got to that point that you must choose between Van Vorst and me—do you understand that? It is the meaning of what I have done to-day, and what I will do to-morrow, and the next day, if occasion rises.'

'Then you really mean to hound me out of London in the very midst of the gayest season we've had for years? Then we'll go abroad. If you take me to Tranmere, I'll kill either myself or you.'

He smiled slightly, the sort of smile provoked by the vagaries of a spoilt child.

'Very well. This is Thursday; I shall make my arrangements, and we will start for the Continent on Saturday.'

'And what'll we do when we get there? It's too early for Homburg or Marienbad or Wiesbaden or any of the places. We shall simply



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## The Fighting Line

die of *ennui*; and you know I promised Cowes week to the Illingtons.'

'And to go on with them to Glenbrockie, which Van Vorst has rented from the Duke for five years! No, Judy, you will not carry that little programme out, unless you first throw me over entirely.'

'And supposing I do that? You are provoking me to any lengths.'

'You would be the loser entirely,' he said simply.

'And you the gainer, I suppose,' she snapped.

'If you choose to put it so, you may,' was all he said.

'Talk of decency. Do you think it decent to tell me so frankly that you have ceased to care about me? Even I have never sunk to such depths, I have kept up appearances. I was taught that to do so was a gentlewoman's first duty.'

He laughed again as he rose from the table.

'Your tea will be ready, you had better go up and drink it, Judy.'

'Won't you come up? We've not nearly finished our discussion.'

'No, I don't drink tea.'

'And what are you going to do with me to-night, since you have adopted the rôle of gaoler.'

'I shall dine with you here, but I must go back to the House afterwards to explain matters, and make my arrangements for a prolonged absence.'

'A prolonged absence!' Judy was no fool;

## The Ultimatum

she knew exactly how unwise, how disastrous, it would be for a man in Harold's position to take such a step in the very middle of a crowded and important session. 'They won't like it, Harold. Uncle Franklin will be furious.'

'He will understand.'

'I suppose you'll make me the scapegoat—hold me up to general execration?'

He gave her no reply.

'We'll resume this discussion later on. I really think you are quite mad, Harold Beltravers, and I fear you will discover you are on the wrong lines after all. You can't compel a woman to your point of view.'

'I can see that she does not make a fool of me, at least,' he answered grimly.

She tossed her head and sailed out of the room. When the door closed, his attitude and expression changed. He had done right so far, but of what avail would it be in the long run, since her inner consciousness remained untouched. As she truly said, it is impossible to compel another to a point of view; it must be reached by conviction and some sense of responsibility such as Judy lacked. What could be done with her? What was to become of them both? He sat down before his desk and covered his face with his hands. Depression, hopeless depression seized him; he did not know which way to turn.

## The Fighting Line

Meanwhile, upstairs Judy, munching her hot muffins, laughed a little to herself. She had, on the whole, enjoyed the afternoon. Harold had appeared in a new light, and she respected him as she had not done in the whole course of their married life. She knew he was right, and she secretly gloried in the strength that had asserted itself. Van Vorst, all other men, suffered at the moment by comparison. At the same time, she had no serious intention of altering her ways, nor did she see that the incident of the afternoon could make any serious difference in the long run. Harold could not afford to remain long away from his post. A young, obscure man, with his way to make, even with Agar at his back, he could not become a perpetual absentee. It had created a piquant situation, that was all. She did not for a moment believe that they would leave England on Saturday, and she found herself speculating on the events of the next twenty-four hours.

They dined together at eight o'clock in a somewhat gloomy silence, and immediately Beltravers left for the House. Judy was in a tea-gown, which indicated that she meant to spend the evening in the house. He bade her good evening courteously, telling her he would get home by eleven.

She sat a good while at the table after the hansom drove away, and there was a somewhat mischievous light in her eyes. She had a mind to send a note

## The Ultimatum

to Park Lane to Van Vorst, feeling that some apology to him was needed. Instead, however, she telephoned to the Holborn Town Hall, where she knew Freeman was speaking at a meeting. Then she sat down to wait.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE AWAKENING

WHEN the telephone message was brought to Freeman he had just taken his seat on the platform after making a speech of three-quarters of an hour's duration. Lady Beltravers had not given her name to the person who answered the telephone, nor asked to speak with Freeman ; she had simply asked whether he was in the meeting, and if so, to bid him call at Ebury Street without delay. Freeman felt annoyed when he got the message, and for the moment was inclined to disregard it entirely. After a moment's reflection, however, he slipped away from the platform, and went to the place where the telephone was, intending to ring Lady Beltravers up, and inquire what she wanted. He did so, but got no reply. After a futile waiting he left the building, and took a hansom, which brought him to Ebury Street at half-past nine. He was at once admitted to the room which had now become so familiar to him.

Lady Beltravers was there, still in her tea-gown,

## The Awakening

a mass of soft blue silk and lace. She was sitting at a small bureau, with the light of one softly shaded electric lamp falling on her, apparently busy writing a letter. The rest of the room was in darkness. She rose at the opening of the door, and when she saw him, faintly smiled. He saw, or fancied, that she had shed some recent tears.

'I have come because I could not get you on the telephone,' he said bluntly. 'What is it?'

'It is good of you, but I knew I could rely upon you,' she replied sweetly. 'I am in need of a friend.'

She motioned him to a chair; he took it, but pushed it back into the gloom. She merely drew the light forward until it shone on his face.

'The deluge has come,' she said, leaning back in her chair and folding her arms, which caused the lace to fall back to her elbows, showing their perfect contour. She looked lovely, but Freeman was in no mood to admire her. She saw, or rather felt that, but had no qualms. She meant to have an interesting hour, making a confidant of this man, and incidentally, perhaps, discovering his real attitude of mind towards herself. 'The deluge has come, and I am without one real friend. Oh, don't misunderstand me. There are oceans of persons dying to give me advice; but I want the real, disinterested guidance of a friend.'

'I can hardly flatter myself I occupy that

## The Fighting Line

position, Lady Beltravers. We have not known one another long enough for that; but if I can be of any use, I shall be glad. I doubt it, however, very much.'

'You are too modest, always, friend,' she said plaintively. 'I have had the misfortune to offend my husband to-day, and he has developed into a sort of up-to-date Bluebeard. I am to be taken away on Saturday, the day after to-morrow, and shut up somewhere with no diversion but his company.'

Freeman was silent a moment. He did not want to hear Judy's story; he could perhaps partly guess at it, and he called himself a fool for coming.

'It is seldom wise to bring in a third party,' he said vaguely. 'And there are no disinterested friends.'

'Oh! don't steal away my last prop. I have depended on you; you are so strong, and you are on the outside. I mean you're above and beyond the ordinary trivialities and prejudices. You deal with elemental things.'

'For that reason, any advice I could give would be practically useless. I should not be able to appreciate half of the facts that have contributed to the state of things you allude to.'

'How formal and cold you are!' she said pensively. 'I do not know my friend. You were all sympathy this afternoon, and full of under-

## The Awakening

standing. What have you been talking about to-night—something that has dispelled every illusion?’

He laughed shortly.

‘There were certainly no illusions about it. It was a debate on the failure of our legislation to meet the wants of the age.’

‘I suppose you passed the usual resolutions to abolish everything. I think if you would give a little more attention to internal affairs, and consider, for instance, the laws which govern the ordinary English marriage, you would render a better service to the human race, which, incidentally, includes me. May I tell you what has happened? I must, I don’t know what to do.’

‘Matrimonial differences are better undiscussed from the outside,’ he maintained stoutly. ‘They should be settled *in camera*.’

‘Oh! that’s bosh, besides being impossible. Let me tell you.’

She proceeded to weave an alluring tale, much embroidered and sufficiently alien to facts to place her in the position of the injured. But it did not in the least deceive Freeman, who could read between the lines.

He had been pondering on this woman’s life and line of conduct all the afternoon, and had practically arrived at the same conclusion as Beltravers regarding her. She was dangerous, and should not be encouraged. A curious disillusionment

## The Fighting Line

had come to him that afternoon, and Judy did not know that, so far as she was concerned, Freeman's eyes were opened.

'Why don't you say something?' she asked, when she had done, winding up with a plaintive question. 'Do you think poor I have done anything to merit this sort of high-handed treatment, and should I consent to be carried away by main force, like some impossible culprit?'

Freeman remained silent a further moment.

'Do you really want my opinion, Lady Beltravers? It is not one you will like.'

'Of course I want it, that is why I have sent for you,' she said quickly. 'You are the only person I can trust.'

He passed by the compliment, delivered with that alluring lowering of the eyelid, which had not been without its effect upon him in the earlier stages of their acquaintance.

'Mr. Beltravers is quite right then, and you have no choice.'

Judy gave her shoulders a little shrug.

'You are very elemental. You harbour the old heresy that a wife is merely goods and chattels. The point of view still prevails in the East End, but we up here have given it the go-by. The woman has a right to live her own life.'

'Yes, if she is alone, but if she has taken certain vows, she has to be made to keep them. Down

## The Awakening

East, we take the elemental way,' he said quietly. 'Men are practically the same all the world over. Your husband is jealous of you and of his own honour; he does not trust you, and he takes the only right way to guard himself against disaster.'

Judy sat up, scarcely able to believe her ears. She had played upon this man's feelings through many interesting hours, and had, as she thought, reduced him to subjection, and lo, he had emerged from the ordeal apparently unscathed. Nor was he afraid to assert the fact.

'You are horrible, you men, every one of you!' she cried, with a little passionate stamp. 'I could almost believe that there had been collusion between you and my husband.'

'I have only spoken to him once,' he reminded her. 'On a certain Sunday, in this very room. You must remember it.'

She stamped her foot again.

'You are all alike, you stand by one another; there is a sort of secret free-masonry, and a woman has no chance. You don't even believe a word we say. If I have been civil to other men, it has been all in his interests. He is a fool for himself; he misses every opportunity, he will not make use of any of the ordinary channels through which most men climb to place and power. What are they for—men like Van Vorst, I mean—but to make use of? They get what they want, a little recognition

## The Fighting Line

from the society they want to enter, and if they pay for it, well, it is right that they should.'

She had forgotten for the moment to whom she spoke. In these words she revealed the whole hollow selfishness and vanity of her kind. Freeman's lip curled.

'I understand Mr. Beltravers' point of view,' was all he said.

She bit her lip, aware that she had spoken too freely, that her words would probably alienate Freeman's sympathy for ever.

'You force me to say these things, you and Harold,' she said feverishly. 'I show my worst side; but I have a good side, only nobody has ever taken the trouble to cultivate it. I seem to have been a pariah all my life—accursed, misunderstood by everybody. I am disheartened, I don't know what to do. It is a dangerous mood, because a woman can always get sympathy if she wants it, if not in safe quarters, then in quarters that are dangerous.'

It was partly a threat, but did not move Freeman in the least. To him she was simply a shallow, empty creature, who exploited her personal charms for her own amusement, and had not one serious or uplifting thought concerning life—a woman who held no vows sacred, and worshipped no god except herself. If his judgment was severe, he need not be blamed; it was in the main correct.

## The Awakening

'I am going, Lady Beltravers,' he said, rising to his feet. 'I can be of no use. It is hardly even decent for me to be here listening to your private affairs. I trust that they will be arranged yet to your satisfaction.' He spoke hesitatingly, and his face, where the light fell upon it, was gloomy and forbidding.

'Then you, too, blame me,' she said plaintively. 'You refuse to take into consideration the motive which governed my conduct. I assure you it was an unselfish one. And I shall never see you again.'

A faint tremor crossed his face.

'It was a mistake that I ever came here, Lady Beltravers—a mistake that I am here now.'

'Then you regret everything? Our intimate talks, our friendship that has been such a boon to me—on which I have rested, not aware that it was a broken reed like all the rest.'

'It was a mistake,' he repeated, as he turned to go, feeling that every moment added to his discomfort, and complicated matters. 'It has taught me this only—that every man should stick not only to his own trade, but his own class. Good-night, Lady Beltravers, and good-bye. Since you have asked my advice, may I offer it in a few words? Your husband is your friend. If you remember that, it will probably solve every difficulty.'

Her face whitened a little, as it had whitened on

## The Fighting L' e

the Terrace of the House of Commons; but Freeman did not know the signs. He felt that he had been, perhaps, ungracious; he would thank her for such kindness as she had bestowed.

'I must thank you for your graciousness to me,' he said quietly. 'Probably we shall never meet again. It will be better not.'

She raised her hand and pointed to the door.

'Go,' she said, in a high, clear voice. 'And take your East-End insolence with you. I might have known; you are elemental in everything, even in the decent courtesies of life. You are like the rest of them—take all we have to give, and then pass by on the other side.'

Freeman bowed his head and went. He had no wish nor desire to refute her words; his uppermost feeling was one of absolute relief that the episode was closed. He hastened from the house, eager to place miles between himself and the place of his folly. It had been brief, but its shame made him tingle still; he had taken part, though innocently, in the woman's degradation. His thoughts of his own home were very tender, as he went back, in passionate gratitude to the woman who had been his true wife, the elemental woman who had called things by their true name, and by her sanctified common-sense had kept him in the right way. Ah! how lonely his life had been since she left him, how devoid of any high purpose, how barren of

## The Awakening

achievement of which she would have approved. A woman of the people she had been, but with a heart of gold. It was a man's last misfortune to lose such a one! It was not safe for him to walk alone.

As he hastened towards his home, he remembered suddenly, with a pang, how empty it was. They had taken his boy from him, and left him stranded. He could not go back there; his heart naturally turned towards the River House and his friend. He would see Merivale and make a clean breast of the folly that had made a barrier between them in the last weeks.

He was fortunate in his means of communication, and reached the River House soon after ten o'clock. There was a light in the sitting-room window, but when he tried the front door it was locked. To his amazement, the blind was pulled aside at the moment, and the face of Adelaide looked out. Next moment she was at the door.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### COME TO HIMSELF

'**H**ow are you here, Adelaide?' he asked stupidly. 'Where is Merivale?'

'I took the chanst, sir, when Manny wus aw'y, to move this arternoon. The greengrocer wus very glad, as 'e 'ad a slack d'y. I run down fust an' asted Mister Merivale. 'E's gone hup now to 'Olborn to look fer you, an' tell yer. Ain't yer seen 'im?'

Freeman shook his head.

'It's been a curious day all through, and it seems like a year,' he said somewhat heavily, as he stepped within the familiar door. 'I believe I could take something to eat, or a cup of coffee. I've had nothing since my dinner in the City Road at one o'clock, and then I don't think I ate much.'

A strange feeling of relief, almost of exhilaration, was his. His spirits were rising every moment. Adelaide's pleasant face, her smile of welcome, and above all, the knowledge that he had got away from the Camberwell Road, that here was his opportunity to make a fresh start, made him feel happy.

## Come to Himself

'Supper's ready—bin in since eight, sir. There's a nice bit of cold bacon. I put it hon directly I got 'ere, an' now it's stone cold. My, this is a darlin' little plice; I'm in luv wiv it, I tell yer, an' I'll mike it a little paradise, but it won't seem like 'ome till Manny comes back.'

'That's true, Adelaide,' said Freeman soberly, as he followed her into the sitting-room, where she had been putting the last touches to the table. Her special pride was a penny bunch of roses in a blue bowl in the centre of the table, and the whole place was shining.

'You're a good soul, Adelaide, and I don't know how we, but especially, how I, am going to repay you for it all.'

Adelaide opened wide her eyes.

'Payment—wot payment do I want? I'm a-goin' ter 'ave the time of me life 'ere, bein' me own missis, an' aw'y from Skimminses. Ol' gel cried fit to break 'er 'eart ter-d'y, w'en Wilkins gev ol' Tom Noddy the gee-hup, an' we drove hoff, she did reely.'

'Well, I don't wonder.'

'I ain't bin very 'appy all d'y, thinkin' on Manny, sir. I wus afride yer'd git on ter me abart it, but I couldn't 'elp it. The genelman was very masterful, an' 'ere's 'is note. 'Ad it in me pocket in case it got out of the w'y.'

Freeman took the note from her hand, but did not read it; he simply slipped it in his pocket.

## The Fighting Line

'It wasn't your fault, Adelaide, and he's all right. I've seen him.'

'Ave ye, sir?' she asked excitedly. 'But 'ow in all the world did ye know 'e'd gone?'

'I saw Miss Romaine in London, and she told me. The gentleman who took Manny away is her cousin.'

'Oh, is 'e? Then the darlin's all right,' said Adelaide, in a voice of deep satisfaction. 'It's a queer bis'ness, all the sime, don't yer think? An' 'ow long will 'e stop aw'y?'

Her eyes were bright with tears as she put the question, and a curious softness crept once more about Freeman's heart. Where could such devotion be found? Not in the whole of London, could it be purchased at any price.

'You're a good soul, Adelaide, and I'm a bad egg,' he said abruptly. 'Bring on the bacon; I believe I can smell it. I don't expect Mr. Merivale will be long. These are bad hours for him to keep, almost eleven o'clock. Ah, there he is, I believe.'

He stepped back into the passage, and Merivale opened the door.

'There you are. We seem to have been playing at Box and Cox all day,' he said, with an air of relief. 'Where, may I ask, have you been, Charlie; I got to the meeting just as it was closing, to find that you had left it at nine o'clock, summoned, they said, up West by telephone.'

## Come to Himself

'Yes, that's true enough ; but come into your own room, George, and I'll tell you all about it later.'

Merivale liked Freeman's tone, and the expression on his face.

'So the little chap's gone ; too bad, seeing our chief object in moving was for him, but I dare say it'll be all right. Seen or heard anything of him, eh ? '

'Yes, I called at Agar's house this afternoon and saw him.'

'I see. Oh, thank you, Adelaide !' he said, as she sought to enter with the coffee-pot. 'Done wonders, hasn't she, Charlie ? The place has never looked like this in my time.'

Freeman nodded, and Adelaide walked out of the room, her head high with pride.

'She's a treasure that, Charlie, and we must take care of her,' observed Merivale, as he drew in his chair to the table. 'Such devotion can't be bought.'

'Just what I've been telling myself,' answered Freeman shortly.

'She's got the true housekeeping instinct. I had a long chat with her at tea-time, and she surprised me, I can tell you. She's got both brains and heart, a rare combination in women, I believe.'

Freeman laughed shortly.

'That's a gross heresy in these days of feminine

## The Fighting Line

advancement and aggression. Well, here we are under one roof, George. We'll probably see more of one another than we have done of late.'

'One would naturally suppose so,' said Merivale drily. 'Only I don't feel at all sure. The fault has never been mine, Charlie. Poplar stands where it did. It is you who have ceased to be stationary.'

'I'm turning over a new leaf,' said Freeman, as he attacked the bacon with evident relish. 'I suppose Adelaide has told you all about the abduction of Manny?'

'Yes. It was a curious proceeding, but doubtless they had a good reason for it. He can't get any harm there. Adelaide tells me they're taking him down into the country. I'd let him stop there, if I were you, until the hottest of the weather is past. We can pop down one Sunday and see him.'

'Well, perhaps,' said Freeman, but seemed less eager than Merivale had expected.

They made haste with their meal, aware that Adelaide had had a long day, and that she ought to be getting to bed. They complimented her on their enjoyment of it when she came in to clear, and bade her the kindest of good nights.

Adelaide, who had been long accustomed to nothing but fault-finding on the part of the mistress she had served faithfully so long, could hardly sleep for joy. Up in her little attic room, so near the

## Come to Himself

skies, and the only heaven she knew of, the place where the stars shone, in the deep silence, broken only by the pleasant splash of old Thames against the wooden piles that kept up the embankment of the little garden, she thanked God for the joy that had come to her, for unexpected emancipation, for congenial and appreciated work, and, above all, for the love of Manny. She prayed with all her might that God would bless what was being done for him, and send him back better to his father. She prayed for Freeman, too, but that petition was less clearly defined; she only asked that he might be blessed and guided, and so fell asleep. The last sound soothing her drowsy ears was the steady murmur of the voices below, where the two men sat in earnest talk. The door was shut, and Merivale had lit his pipe, glad of the feeling of rest and companionship promised by the new order of things.

'You seem to have had a curious day, Charlie. Do you keep a record of them, ever? Strikes me it might make interesting reading occasionally.'

'Very occasionally,' answered Freeman drily.

'It would be a pretty stiff record of wasted hours.'

Merivale laughed.

'Same might be said of most of us. We're going strong at the works. The difficulty is to keep Larmer back; he's all for drastic reforms, and he has less sense of the fitness of things than any

## The Fighting Line

man I've ever known. Wants to begin by getting all the men to call him Percy, carrying the idea of a brotherhood a bit too far, as I tried to explain to him.'

Freeman looked interested.

'It sounds the queerest thing I've ever heard of. What's happened to the chap—got a sunstroke, eh?' he asked, touching his forehead significantly. Merivale shook his head.

'Nothing of that sort. Got religion, I suppose; that's the beginning, middle, and end of it. Wonder if it'll last.'

Freeman faintly winced, remembering the words Judy Beltravers had spoken on this very subject a few hours before.

'What difference is it going to make to you, that's the thing that concerns me most, boy? And it's the test; he ought to be made to understand the value of such service as you've given there. I believe, myself, he'll never know or learn enough to appreciate it. It takes the man on the spot.'

'But he is on the spot,' said Merivale good-humouredly. 'He's sleeping to-night in the attic room at the porter's lodge. And he's going to have a room constructed for himself adjacent to the office.'

'It won't wash,' said Freeman laconically.

'I think it's genuine. He's burning to redress everything in the same degree as he was indifferent

## Come to Himself

about it before. It'll take me all my time to apply the brake. There would be as much harm done one way as the other, and the men are not capable of understanding his point of view. I spend most of my time in warning him what a ticklish subject the British working-man is to tackle, even with experience and wisdom to guide one.'

Freeman nodded.

'You're wonderful, George; your head is screwed on tight and square, and no mistake. I wish I had been cast in the same mould.'

Merivale leaned back in the old easy-chair and, kicking off his boots, gave himself up to absolute enjoyment of the hour. Things were improving with him, the dull cloud of misery had lifted a little from his life. And now he had his friend, the man he loved best in the whole of London, to share his home, and to give the necessary companionship. He felt strong enough to bear everything else.

'You look uncommonly tired, Charlie—as if you'd been through some mill to-day. We ought to get upstairs to bed; but you can take a long lie to-morrow morning. I feel as fit as a fiddle.'

'I'm dead tired,' admitted Freeman. 'But I shouldn't sleep if I did go to bed. This is a God-send; that girl knew a thing or two when she made the move to-day. She's the sort of woman that always does the right thing, and never the wrong one.'

## The Fighting Line

'So much the better for us; but we mustn't let it make us selfish,' said Merivale. 'Well, what have you been about all day, eh? Out with it.'

'I want to tell you, only you must give me time. I have been through the mill, as you express it. I've been twice to Lady Beltravers' house. I was there after I left the meeting. It was she who telephoned from Ebury Street.'

'Ebury Street! Is that where they live?'

Freeman nodded.

'George, I've made an utter fool of myself.'

Merivale sat up suddenly, half-afraid of what he might hear next.

'I suppose you've been making love to her—a dangerous game to play with a woman of that sort and class.'

Freeman reddened slowly.

'Well, not exactly, upon my honour, George. I don't think I've uttered a single word you could not have heard.'

'Then you let her make love to you, which is one degree worse?' observed Merivale shrewdly.

'It's a low-down thing to say about a woman, but—but you are right, George. It's a vile atmosphere that, and she's—well—I'm sorry for the man who has got her. She ought to be down here, George. Their method here may be primeval, but it's drastic, and leaves one in no doubt. A woman like Lady Beltravers can poison a whole area.'

## Come to Himself

Merivale nodded. It was precisely his own point of view.

'I thought it was a mistake, your going there, from the beginning. You knew I disapproved.'

'Of course; and it was because I knew I was a fool that I resented. But my eyes are opened. I was there at lunch to-day, at her house alone—nobody else present, I mean, when Miss Romaine came.'

'It is a wonder she was admitted.'

'I rather think she came up of her own accord, having asked who was with her cousin—in fact, I'm certain of it. I could read it in her eyes. And she practically turned me out. I expect they had some words after I left; the only clear memory I have is the contempt in her eyes. *She's* a woman now, George—a woman in a thousand, as noble and priceless as her cousin is the other thing.'

'Well, what happened after that?'

'I went off hurt and sore, with a sort of whipped-hound feeling, to see Manny at the Agars' place. I did see him, and hurt him with my tongue, as was natural, feeling as I did. Then I spent an hour or two with Joey and the rest, at Blakeney's rooms; from there I went to the Holborn meeting.'

'Where you spoke?'

'Where I spoke after Blakeney. At ten minutes to nine Lady Beltravers 'phoned to me from Ebury Street.'

## The Fighting Line

'Asking you to go?'

'Yes, and I went. She had had a row with her husband, it seems.'

'On your account?' said Merivale, sitting forward.

'No, about another man, a South African. Beltravers seems to have made her sit up. He's a good, square man, George, the best of all that doubtful batch. I tell you, I felt uncommonly cheap.'

'What did she want you for?' asked Merivale bluntly.

Freeman shrugged his shoulders.

'Wanted sympathy. I tell you, I had a bad half-hour, but I managed to get out. I've bid good-bye to Lady Beltravers and all her tribe, George. I've come to myself.'

Merivale nodded; he could read between the lines, fill up all the gaps Freeman had left. It was not an uncommon story, and in no way surprised him; it was precisely on the lines he had expected since that Sunday she had arrived, an alien element, at the River House, and carried Freeman away in the motor. He felt glad that he had come to himself so soon. But Freeman was like that, fiery, impetuous, driving every hobby hard; the stuff reformers are made of, no doubt, but reaching any desirable goal through very stormy seas. Merivale remembered the calm-faced wife who had been

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IN THE LONG, DEEP SILENCE HE FELL UPON HIS KNEES.

[see page 285.]



## Come to Himself

able to hold his eager spirit in bounds and keep him, without seeming to guide him, in the right path; and casually he wondered at the ways of Providence.

'I'm glad I've got you back, old chap,' he said affectionately. 'Don't look so glum; we make mistakes, all of us. This one can be relegated to the limbo of forgotten things. Let this be the last of it. I think I'll go up aloft then; it's nearly twelve, and I have to jump up on the stroke of six.'

He held out his hand, and Freeman grasped it, and their eyes met.

'I'll come by-and-by,' he said. 'I'll smoke another pipe—the room on the left, isn't it?'

Merivale nodded and closed the door.

Freeman filled his pipe, but it was never lit. He sat there in the deep silence renewing certain vows which had been broken in the years the locusts had eaten. He would redeem these wasted hours, devote himself anew to the service of humanity, take broader views, try to arrive at some simpler, and therefore more Christ-like point of view. He remembered with shame how he had fallen short of his profession; while Merivale, who professed nothing, left no duty undone. Certain words of Holy Writ rose up in sharp rebuke before his acute mental vision—'A sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.' In the long, deep silence, he fell upon his knees.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### BUT SHE KNEW

THE sun shone high next morning in the Isle of Dogs. Freeman was awakened by the voice of Adelaide singing at her work. He rose, and threw open the window. There was no need to draw the blinds. Freeman was in the habit of sleeping with uncurtained windows everywhere. His last act before he fell asleep in the Camberwell Road, where every window was overlooked, had been to draw up the blinds after the lights were out. The air was not so silent now, but quivering with a medley of sounds, the dim clamour of the new day's toil, but there was none of the sharp, exasperating noises common to a main thoroughfare ; in comparison, it sounded like music. But Adelaide's voice was above all ; she sang out of the fulness of her heart. Freeman could easily distinguish the words—

I will sing of my Redeemer,  
And His wondrous love for me.

It had a swaying, melodious chorus which he hummed to himself as he began to dress. All the

## But She Knew

world was fair. God had permitted him a new lease of life. The river was gloriously alive in the shimmer of the morning sun, all its foulness forgotten, the tide was high ; it lapped the wooden battery which kept up the little garden with a pleasant murmuring sound. How Manny would revel in it presently when he should come back ! Freeman pictured how he would draw the bed to the window first thing, so that Manny could bid good-morning to the sun, and the life that flowed ceaselessly upon the great highway. Once more life was a live beautiful thing, full of all possibilities. He thanked God for life, that he had not passed beyond the last barrier ; that one more chance was his.

It was nearly nine o'clock. Presently the roar and shriek from a thousand chimneys gave the signal for an hour's cessation from toil. It had scarcely ceased before Merivale came in by the gate, and Freeman ran down to greet him.

Together they stood a moment in the sunny garden, which looked its best in the clear morning light, before all the vapours of the day had be-smirched its clearness. A great sense of peace, of lively gratitude, was in Freeman's heart, and written on his face.

'You look fit, Charlie,' said Merivale, with a smile.

'I feel it. I've come down to my country

## The Fighting Line

quarters, Geo, and ought to present a smiling front, lazy beggar that I am. Here you have put in a good three hours' work before me ; but it was two o'clock before I went upstairs.'

'I thought so. Come in, this is the first time I've breakfasted here since Polly went away.'

As they entered the house door, Adelaide crossed the narrow hall, carrying the breakfast-tray with its steaming load. She had donned a clean, blue cotton frock in honour of the occasion, and she made a pleasant bit of homeliness for these two homeless men. Freeman bade her a kind good-morning. She had been downstairs before Merivale left the house at six o'clock.

'Do you remember a chap of the name of Dredger—Tom Dredger, that makes some trouble at the works in the early part of last year?' asked Merivale, as they sat down to the clean, well-spread table.

Freeman nodded.

'Pal of Glazebrook, never out of the "Three Tuns" at Shadwell. I know the chap. But you paid him off?'

Merivale nodded.

'He has been up lately seeking a job. Heard of Larmer's soft side, I believe, and only turned up to see what he could get. He's a hypocrite, and a thorough bad lot. I tried to explain him to Larmer, but he insists that there is no man without the divine spark, instances himself as an

## But She Knew

example, and will give Dredger another chance, ten if he needs them. It'll do harm at the works, and there's sure to be ructions.'

'Sure; but you'll have to leave Larmer to make his own experiments, and be taught by experience.'

'Precisely what I will do, and stand by him when he makes mistakes.'

'You've given up the idea of leaving meanwhile then?'

'Yes, I begin to be interested, and Larmer is a type one does not come across very often. I like him, and there's no doubt about his sincerity, though I don't for a moment believe that he will be able to continue on his present lines.'

They enjoyed the hour together, but both missed the presence of Manny. They spoke of him a good deal, and later in the day Freeman went up West to see whether he had left Connaught Place, and, if so, to obtain the address in the country to which they had gone. He was in a happier, more peaceful frame of mind; once more the daily affairs of life began to attract him. He knew that some explanation was due to his colleagues he had so abruptly left at an important meeting, where he had been expected to move the chief resolution.

As he stepped outside the ragged hedge he saw a familiar figure, Janet Romaine, in a neat coat and skirt of pale grey, very quiet and lady-like, but

## The Fighting Line

he remembered her more gratefully in her nurse's garb, which had seemed to attune so well with the Isle of Dogs. He raised his cap, and a curious expression flitted across his face. He did not forget the circumstances in which they had met yesterday, but he encountered her frank gaze with a clear, open look which entirely reassured her.

'Good afternoon, Mr. Freeman. I have come to pay a little call on Adelaide. Is she at home?'

'Yes, Miss Romaine, she is, and glad she will be to see you.'

'Has she got settled down? I am afraid I have come rather soon, but to-morrow I am going into the country with Mr. Agar.'

'I am on my way to see my boy.'

Janet nodded.

'Yes, I have a message for you to go there. We leave Waterloo to-morrow morning at nine, and Manny wants to see you very much. You saw him yesterday, I think; he told me you had been there.'

'Yes, I saw him,' replied Freeman steadily. 'It would have been better had I not gone. I was in no mood for it.'

Janet looked beyond him with inscrutable eyes.

'Everybody seems to be going out of town abnormally early. My cousin, Lady Beltravers, and her husband leave Victoria for the Continent to-morrow also.'

## But She Knew

Freeman made no reply, and Janet came back to the subject of Manny.

'You need have no qualms about him; I will see that he is settled nicely. It is a beautiful place. Even if he can do no more than lie on the grass under the trees, it will do him good. And there is the sea; I don't think he has seen the sea.'

'Not since he was a baby, and his mother took him to Margate,' said Freeman, with a difficult note in his voice.

'I shall be back on Monday, and I will either write or come down to see you and tell you how I left him. Are you going? Good-bye then.'

She offered her hand quite frankly. Freeman did not for a moment respond; he hesitated, as if casting about in his mind how he could best express some difficult thought.

'Miss Romaine, I should like to tell you that you were right about yesterday. I have been a fool, but nothing worse. I thank you for what you did.'

Janet's face flushed deeply. She had been unhappy about what had occurred in Ebury Street, and had blamed herself for undue interference.

'I was afraid you would think it unwarrantable, but I couldn't help it. Judy is my cousin, and I am ashamed of her; and if you knew her husband, what a splendid fellow he is, and how she tries him!'

'I know. Believe me, I deeply regret that I

## The Fighting Line

should ever have gone there. I shall always be grateful for your courage ; you will never know the good it may have done.'

He lifted his cap and passed on, with that haste a man feels when faced with a trying situation. He had intended to write these words ; he took the opportunity to say them instead, but he was glad to pass on.

Janet fully understood ; her eyes shone as she left him and passed within the little wicket in the ragged hedge. How dear the little place looked in the drowsy sunshine ! She had invested it with many untold charms, but to-day it seemed to justify the spell her imagination had woven about it. The front door stood open wide. Her little knock brought Adelaide quickly to the head of the stairs, tying her white apron above her neat black dress, a new one which Merivale had presented her with at Christmas, but which had never been worn in the Camberwell Road.

Adelaide, too, had romance and imagination ; her idea had been to leave as much as possible of the old life behind, and to start anew. To her, the Isle of Dogs represented the gateway of all possibility—happy possibility—undreamed of in the Camberwell Road.

' Oh, miss ! ' she cried, with a little breath of joy. ' My, ain't this fine ? I was just a wonderin' an' wishin' yer'd come soon.'

## But She Knew

'I wanted to come to-day, Adelaide, because I am going out of London to-morrow,' said Janet, with a pleasant smile. 'I don't need to ask how you like your new home; your glorified face tells me.'

'It's 'eaven, miss—just 'eaven, an' no more. Talk abart the country. I don't want no country. W'en I sees the sun a-glentin' on the water w'en I hopens me winder this mornin', I thinks of the sea of glass in the Bible. This is me 'eaven, miss. My, ain't 'E bin good ter me!'

Her reverent look seemed to rebuke Janet, and she gave a little sigh as she passed into the sitting-room. This simple soul could take more from life than she, who had so much to be grateful for—so much, but yet who fretted because one thing she wanted most was denied her.

'You looks a bit tired, miss; wite a minnit, an' I sets the kettle hon an' gits yer a cup o' tea.'

Janet nodded, because she knew that to render her this simple service would give Adelaide real joy. When she was left she took a walk round the little room. It was very simply furnished, but the things were old and chosen with good taste. Only four pictures were on the walls, fine old engravings in ebony frames. Janet knew enough to realise their value, and casually wondered where Merivale had picked them up. He could have told her that they had been purchased for a few

## The Fighting Line

pence off a barrow in Shoreditch Lane. There were many books, some home-made shelves, fashioned by Merivale in the leisure of his Saturday afternoons, covered one of the walls entirely, and were full. She was examining them, trying perhaps to find some key to Merivale's outlook upon life in their titles, when Adelaide brought in the little tray.

'Now we must settle about the lessons,' she said brightly as she turned round. 'I am coming back to London on Monday, but only for six weeks, I am afraid. We shall have to arrange for you to come to me; I could come to Camberwell, but hardly here.'

'No, miss, w'y should yer?' asked Adelaide. 'Hi'll come fast enuff, if I gits the chanst.'

Adelaide's voice was sweet and well-modulated. Janet resolved that one of her first attempts should be to try and soften the harshness of her speech, to teach her the use of the unoffending, but all-important aspirate she abused so freely.

'I thought p'r'aps yer'd forgotten, that yer didn't mean it.'

'Then you had no right to think any such thing; I told you I was in earnest. We shall have a busy winter. I expect to come back for the whole winter early in October.'

'Do yer mean down 'ere, miss, to the Settlement, where yer wus afore?'

## But She Knew

Janet shook her head.

'No such luck for me, Adelaide, I fear. I may pay casual visits, but that will be all. No, I shall be in the Cromwell Road, but we shall arrange our evenings or afternoons, whichever will be best for you. Meanwhile, we shall make a beginning, and I will set you some tasks to do while I am away. I have no doubt Mr. Merivale or Mr. Freeman will help you.'

'Mister Merivale. I shan't ask Mister Freeman,' said Adelaide firmly.

'Why?' asked Janet interestedly.

'Well, becos I wants to learn wivout 'is knowin', see?'

Janet nodded.

'I see. Well, I am sure you could ask Mr. Merivale; and look at these books, Adelaide. You must keep before you in all your difficulties the fact that one day you shall be able to read and understand them.'

'Nivver saw sich a man fer books. 'E 'as 'em ev'rywhere; found two under 'is pillar this mornin', an' there's one in every pocket, w'en I comes to brush 'is clothes.'

'I can see that he loves books,' said Janet, with a glance round. 'Now, I want to tell you about Manny—it's right you should know. You know there is a great surgeon staying at Mr. Agar's, where he is now, and he thinks something can be

## The Fighting Line

done for the poor little chap—to make him walk, I mean.'

Adelaide's face was a study.

'No, miss, nivver hin the world!'

'Yes, indeed. He made his examination this morning—I was there all the time—and he is almost sure. We are to get him down to the country, feed him up a little, and then the surgeon will be back. He is going to Scotland for a fortnight, and will come to my uncle's place on his way back. By that time Manny will be stronger, they will feed him up, and then perhaps it will be done.'

'A hoperation, I s'pose, like they do in them 'orspitals?'

'Something of that kind, but he did not say much—in fact, I never met a man who said so little. But nothing must be said to his father, Adelaide. I thought I'd tell you the secret; I know you can keep it.'

'Won't they heven tell 'im w'er they're goin' ter do it?'

'No, for fear of disappointment; and Dr. von Leippman says it will not be dangerous, that he will not be any worse for it, even if he is no better. What would you do, Adelaide, supposing Manny should come back to the Isle of Dogs, walking on his feet?'

'Hi should cry, miss, fit ter break me 'eart, fer joy.'

## But She Knew

'Well, it may happen. You will keep the secret, won't you?'

'Yus, miss, fer sure I will! My! I carn't git hover it.'

'I feel very excited myself. What a sweet child he is, and how devoted to his father.'

'And 'is favver ter 'im,' said Adelaide jealously. 'I nivver see sich two. As good as readin' the Bible to watch 'em, I allus s'y.'

Janet finished her tea and rose to go.

'I'm pleased to have seen you, Adelaide, and I know you'll be happy here; it's written all over your face, and breathes in the very air of the house. I'm glad for you, my dear, you deserve it. Now, I must run round to the Settlement. You will come and see me then on Monday or Tuesday of next week. What time could you make it convenient to come?'

'It must be your time, miss.'

Janet pondered a moment.

'The afternoon would be the best—three o'clock, perhaps, next Tuesday, and then I shall have thought it all out and arranged some plan. And I'll get the books ready.'

She nodded, and drew on her gloves. Adelaide followed her to the door, adoring gratitude written on her face.

'Miss, I carn't, reely I carn't.'

'Can't what?'

## The Fighting Line

'Thank yer as I want ter do, but hit's 'ere, a bustin' ter git hout,' she said, laying her hand on her heart.

'I know, I've often felt like that myself; don't say anything. Good-bye, my dear. God bless you. If everybody did their duty as faithfully, and with such a sunshiny face, what a world it would be!'

Adelaide's eyes were full as she ran down to the gate to let her visitor out.

Janet walked down to the end of the narrow street, and then deliberately turned back and took another step which brought her towards the great gates of Larmer's works. She did not know why, but it seemed as if some magnet drew her feet. As she passed them, Merivale came out, accompanied by two gentlemen. Larmer was not there, however, nor did Merivale leave them or speak. He raised his cap, however, and as they passed, their eyes met.

They were gone in a moment along to another gate which gave admission to a different portion of the works. When they had passed in, Janet turned back; her face wore a strange, uplifted look, and her heart sang, because now she knew. That glance of surprise had revealed all he might never tell her of the love that burned in his heart, a steady flame for her. But she knew.

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE NIGHT BEFORE

THE ensuing week Freeman had to pay a visit to the Continent for the purpose of speaking at a Labour Conference at Zurich, in return for the compliment the Swiss delegate had paid them. He went by way of Paris, where he spent twenty-four hours.

Walking in the Palais Royal, seeking an inexpensive trinket for Adelaide, he suddenly met Lady Beltravers. She was alone, and it was impossible not to stop. The liveliest surprise leaped in her eyes, and she stood still, with a smile. She was not vindictive; already she had forgotten the wrath of their last parting.

‘Well, you in Paris! What is the meaning of this?’

‘I am on my way to Zurich.’

‘To Zurich! Are you taking a Continental trip, likewise? Things are queer nowadays, all topsy-turvy; one never knows what may happen next. We met seventeen brake-loads in the Champs Élysées this morning, all wearing a small

## The Fighting Line

British flag pinned on their breasts, so needlessly aggressive, but so very English. We were told they were cotton people from Lancashire. Perhaps you are chaperoning them ? ’

‘ No,’ answered Freeman. ‘ I am on my own account, going on to speak at the Zurich Conference.’

‘ Oh, the Red Republican business ! Well, will you come to lunch with us at the Élysée ? I believe my husband will be pleased to see you. I bore him, as I told him I should.’

Freeman looked at her in astonishment. Could nothing ruffle that fair, placid exterior ? While he hesitated, Beltravers came out of a shop.

‘ Mr. Freeman, Harold. No, he has not come over to see me ; he is going to Zurich to attend a Labour Demonstration. I have just asked him to lunch ; if you second the invitation, I think he will come.’

Beltravers looked at Freeman oddly, but he had never had any suspicion of him ; he believed him to be an honest man.

‘ Why, yes, of course ; come, we are just going now. We’ll take a *fiacre*.’

Before Freeman could protest they were off. Judy smiled as she leaned back and put up her parasol. She had been bored all the morning, and was also a little out of sorts because there was no money to spare for the Rue de la Paix.

## The Night Before

Harold had said positively she could not have a gown or even a simple hat there, without payment. She was very much amused at seeing Freeman, and had no doubt in her mind but that she could pay him out for that uncomfortable evening in Ebury Street. She would make Harold the instrument of his punishment, then justice would be appeased.

The two men talked cordially. Beltravers, asking a few questions, was surprised to find that Freeman already knew Paris well, also that he could speak French.

They quickly arrived at the hotel, and once more, as Freeman crossed its luxurious portals, he hated himself, for he had no business there; his whole business and creed forbade him to share the luxury they so continually denounced.

Judy had insisted on coming to the new hotel. Harold had found her pettish, cross, difficult to please; but he did not care, he had got her away from the Van Vorsts. But the prospect of spending the next two months in the constant society of a grumbling woman at times rather dismayed him. On the whole, it was a relief to meet Freeman, and when they parted, it was with much cordiality on both sides.

'I hope we shall meet in London,' said Beltravers quite sincerely, as he walked out to the door of the hotel.

Freeman returned to his modest lodging in the

## The Fighting Line

Rue du Bac, and collected his goods preparatory to getting his train for Zurich. He had forgotten the trinket for Adelaide. Once more the old, unsettled feeling surged in his soul. He could have cursed himself for his weakness. He took a *fiacre* to the station, and all the way the news-vendors were bawling their wares. There seemed to be some item of English news specially interesting—some murder in London sufficiently gruesome to make a thrilling paragraph. But Freeman did not buy a paper; he was unprepared for the meeting he was to address on the morrow, and wished to keep his mind free for its study in the train.

Meanwhile, London was in a ferment concerning the same tragedy which provided sensation-mongers with something new and startling in the annals of crime. We must go back and follow the tragedy from its beginning.

Freeman had left Charing Cross by the boat train the previous evening. Merivale, after seeing him off, returned straight to Poplar, and on his way home went round by the works to mention something to Larmer he had forgotten in the earlier part of the evening. It was after eleven when he reached the familiar gates, intending, if all was in darkness, to pass on without disturbing his employer; but he knew that Larmer sat up late, and that he seemed able to exist with a minimum amount of sleep. The light still burned

## The Night Before

in the little room of the porter's lodge over the gateway looking out upon the road. It was very quiet there after working-hours, there being no traffic. Merivale whistled, certain that the sound would carry through the still air. Instantly the blind was drawn aside, and Larmer looked out.

'Oh, come up, Merivale; just a moment, and I'll open the door. It isn't locked, but the chain's on; they've gone to bed.'

A moment later Merivale was admitted, and passed quietly upstairs to Larmer's room.

'I'm sleeping in my new room to-night,' he explained, as he closed the door. 'I've been there two nights, but I haven't got my stuff moved yet. It'll be done to-morrow.'

He referred to the room he had had prepared at the office, a small apartment which had been used as a cloakroom, and had without difficulty been added to. The alterations were only just finished.

'You sit up late,' said Merivale. 'I made sure I should find you. I wanted to say I'd made a mistake in my calculations about the Hull affair. I've been going over it again, and I'm a hundred pounds out—a hundred and twenty pounds. It can't be done for less. It's the most curious thing in the world how I should have come to make that mistake.'

'Well, it wasn't sufficient to keep you awake, surely?' observed Larmer, with a smile.

## The Fighting Line

'Not exactly; but I was very positive about it, as a man usually is when he is in the wrong,' said Merivale, with a laugh. 'There's no harm done in telling you, anyhow. I'm late myself to-night; I've been up at Charing Cross seeing Freeman off. He's gone to Paris *en route* for Zurich.'

'Ah, yes, I think he mentioned he was going. I have been in London, too, dining with the Romaines in Cromwell Road, and I've had an uncommonly pleasant evening.'

'Perhaps you shut yourself off too much from—from London,' suggested Merivale, hesitating upon his choice of a word.

'Oh, no, I don't care for it; but I like the Romaines. The old man's a fine specimen, and my cousin Janet—I have always called her my cousin, though the relationship is really more distant—she is my ideal of all a woman ought to be.'

Merivale felt a pang at his heart. What more natural or fitting than that these two should marry? There could be no objection raised, money smoothing away every barrier, and they would be one in heart and purpose, working together for the common good. All this passed through his mind in a flash of time, and he could not but admit that it would be an ideal union. Larmer's next words might have suggested that he had read Merivale's thought.

## The Night Before

'She is the sort of woman I should like to have married, only I shall never marry,' said he steadily. 'Have a cigar? They're uncommonly good; I had one myself as I came down in the train. It was a pity we didn't meet in town; they were asking very kindly for you in the Cromwell Road, and I promised Sir Hugo that you would come down with me for a week-end to Ruthlin, perhaps next month. They leave London on the twenty-fifth of July; they tell me the season is shortened very much this year on account of the Court mourning. What an interest Miss Romaine has in Poplar; she will come back here, Merivale.'

'I am afraid not, her parents are opposed.'

'Only her mother,' said Larmer, looking with quiet keenness at Merivale's face. He knew, or at least guessed, a part of what was passing in his mind. In the course of a quarter of an hour's conversation with Janet on the balcony of the house in Cromwell Road that evening, he had been able to read between the lines, and come to a correct conclusion, but the time for speech was not yet. 'She only came up from the country this morning. Been down there with the Agars. She reports well of the little chap; he is delighted with the sea. That was a fine act, Merivale, to take him away.'

'Freeman thought it a little high-handed.'

Larmer laughed.

## The Fighting Line

'Some of our best deeds—the one we shall get most credit for—savour of that,' he said inscrutably. 'I was in London this afternoon, for what purpose do you think, Merivale?'

Merivale shook his head.

'I went to make my will, at least to set it in motion. I have the impression that I shall not be a long-lived man.'

'You are fagged already with the life here, and I am certain that to sleep and live on the premises is a ghastly mistake,' said Merivale, rather warmly. 'I assure you, if you went to London—to the Cromwell Road perhaps, and came down here to business as other men do, you would be the gainer, and would moreover bring a fresh spirit and tone to the works.'

'What about you? How many times have you slept in this very room?' asked Larmer, with a slight smile.

'I am different. I am a working-man, inured to the routine; I have never been out of Poplar. I wish I could persuade you.'

Larmer shook his head.

'You won't persuade me. I have a lot of arrears to make up, and I mean to overtake them in my own way. I spent two hours at Furnival's Inn this afternoon, and I feel a bit easier in my mind. I've at least made some shape of setting my house in order.'

## The Night Before

Merivale did not like to hear this ; it indeed gave him a curious pang.

'You're a very young man, Mr. Larmer,' he began, but Larmer stopped him.

'Young men have been known to die, and I've been within an ace of it not so very long ago,' Larmer reminded him. 'It won't bring the end any sooner, will it? My old friend, St. Leger, who did the deed for me, was inclined to protest like you ; but when I pointed out to him what frightful complications would ensue in the event of anything happening to me, he agreed that I was right. I signed the document to-day, so that the deed is practically done. It was quite a simple matter after all. Next month we shall enter upon a new order of things ; you will become a full partner, Merivale.'

Merivale looked the surprise he felt.

'Sir, this is rather premature. You have not proved me yet.'

'Haven't I? I think differently. I tell you, you are an inspiration to me, and I want to bind you to myself. But it is too late to go into the whole matter. To-morrow, perhaps, or the next day, we shall go up together to Furnival's Inn, to clinch the business—make it irrevocable. Come, then, it's near midnight—come and see my new bunk, it's uncommonly comfortable.'

Merivale rose. He did not say much, because

## The Fighting Line

his heart was curiously full. The news had come as a complete surprise to him. Larmer, in the last weeks, had not hinted that any such idea was in his mind.

They passed down the little creaking stair out into the silence and darkness of the yard, which they had to cross to reach the group of offices where Larmer had built himself a habitation. It was a very dark, still night, the soundless air carrying the slightest noise.

'I thought there was some one about,' said Merivale, glancing round suspiciously. 'But the dog's sleeping quietly. Hark!'

It was a woman's scream, by no means an uncommon sound in these dark regions. They did not remark upon it. Larmer fitted the key in the outer door, and they passed into the darkness within. The electric switches, however, were conveniently placed, and immediately they found themselves in a blaze of light. The offices were old buildings, dating back to the first beginning of the business, but they were roomy and convenient, and had lately had some modern conveniences added. The room Larmer had taken for his own made a very snug bachelor apartment. It was very bare and simply furnished. A camp-bedstead, a writing-table, a shelf of books—these were the chief items. Merivale contemplated it a moment and shook his head.

## The Night Before

'I don't like it, and I never shall approve of it,' he remarked decidedly. 'It's not wise. Why, even I, who have been here so long, would not care for the isolation and aloofness from other people. I am sure it is bad, sir.'

Larmer smiled a sunny smile.

'It's all a matter of temperament; it pleases me to be here, to feel that I am at the very heart and pulse of this big thing, that it is mine, and I am responsible for it. Now I am going to send you away. Good-night; we'll go over the ground to-morrow again. I hope you'll approve of the terms of the deed.'

Merivale could not speak; he was only conscious of a curious emotion, that was not gratitude merely or appreciation or surprise, but a mingling of all three. They shook hands in silence, and Merivale took his way back through the familiar yard. He had a key to the wicket-gate, and let himself out, locking it on the other side. Before he left the yard he was conscious, for the second time, that there was some one about, an indefinable feeling of an unseen presence. But the dog was quiet on his chain, and the night-watchman, in some part of the premises, would keep the needful look-out. He left the gates and made his way with hastening feet to the wicket in the ragged hedge.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### THE NEXT MORNING

**M**ERIVALE had rather a restless night, and was awake before the usual time. He rose and looked out, to behold the morning sun gleaming brightly on the river, which looked lovely in the clear light. Merivale never tired of that view; the picturesque line of the Greenwich shore completed the picture, one such as Turner loved. The house was quiet; Adelaide was not yet astir, nor did she awake when Merivale went downstairs. He found a cup of milk, and a covered plate of bread-and-butter laid for him on the sitting-room table. It was then just twenty minutes to six o'clock. Already the streets were busy with the throng of toilers passing to their work. They had not gathered, however, at Larmer's gate, even the porter did not seem to be astir. Merivale let himself in and crossed the yard, meeting the night-watchman about half-way, ready to go off duty.

'All well, William?'

'All well, sir.'

'Nobody about in the night? I was here as

## The Next Morning

late as twelve with the master. and I thought some one was about.'

'Nobody, sir. We'd a quiet night, bar a row somewhere behind, about Bolton Street, but nobody tikes no notice of that.'

Merivale nodded and passed on. The blinds of the office were still drawn; he hesitated about knocking, reflecting that Larmer had had a very late night, and was probably sleeping, dead tired. Presently the unearthly shriek of the horn would awaken him, and he would wait till then. He passed on to the engineer's shop, thinking casually of the odd mistake he had made in calculation the previous day, and, incidentally, a little of what Larmer had told him about the impending change in their relationship. A full partner! If he agreed to accept that, it would make a wide difference in his position and prospects, perhaps even he might aspire——

He stopped short, reproving himself sharply for what he imagined a selfish thought. The horn blew with a mighty shriek, and the swarm came tumbling through the gate.

Merivale stood aside a little in the yard, and watched them, as he had often done before. He was looking for one man. He had a word to speak to Dredger, who had now been reinstalled one week, and apparently doing well. Dredger was engaged in the engineer's shop, but he did not put

## The Fighting Line

in an appearance. Thinking it possible he might have missed him, Merivale stepped back to the time-keeper's box.

'Dredger here, Tom?'

'No, sir, not yet.'

'Keep him if he comes, I want to speak to him,' said Merivale.

And the man nodded. An hour passed. Several times Merivale passed by the office, which had to be opened for the clerks at half-past eight. Larmer was sleeping long and soundly, evidently. It was surprising that the whistle on the horn did not awaken him, as well as the tramp of the men's feet as they passed close by the door. There was no other way to get to the main building, except by the narrow passage where the offices stood.

Finally he tried the door. To his surprise, it yielded at once, evidently Larmer had slept with it unlocked. He passed in. A narrow passage, with a glass partition on one side, shut off the various departments and the private rooms from the place where the clerks did their work.

The room Larmer had fitted up for himself was at the far-end of the passage, where it turned again before the door was reached.

Merivale took a few steps, and then stood still; something lay there at the bend of the passage. Unless his eyes strangely misled him, it was the body of a man. He ran forward and stooped

## The Next Morning

down. It was Larmer, dressed, lying with his face turned downwards, his arms spread out—quite dead !

Merivale never forgot the horror of that moment, its ghastly shock. He felt himself unable to move for a moment. He stood, stupidly staring down. At last, however, he pulled himself together and, stooping, sought to move the body tenderly. He even felt glad as he did so that his own eyes had been the first to see, his own hand the first to touch, the master he had learned to love. There was a great bruise upon the head, but the cause of death Merivale could not determine. Reflecting that he must leave everything until the police should arrive, he passed into the room—' the bunk,' as Larmer had called it—and stood still just within the door. The bed, turned down ready for occupation, had not been slept in. On the table there was an open Bible, and a chair drawn close to it ; evidently he had been surprised at his reading, and attacked probably from behind. Another glance, and the whole mystery was revealed ; the safe, which stood in the corner, had been forced, and some of the papers, valueless except to the man to whom they belonged, lay scattered on the floor.

Sick at heart, cold with horror and grief, Merivale stepped back and left the place. He paused again where the body lay, and half-stooped down, feeling that he must lift him and lay him on his bed ; but

## The Fighting Line

he knew it was better to leave everything as he found it. He knelt again, however, and laid his hand to the heart, and against the cold lips, to make sure that life had actually fled. His knowledge told him that he must have been dead some hours.

A few moments more and news of the tragedy spread, creating terrible consternation throughout the whole works. The police arrived, the premises were taken in charge by them, and the body of Larmer laid upon his bed. Work ceased for the rest of the day, and an overwhelming gloom and horror seemed to overspread the whole neighbourhood. The prevailing feeling was one of regret and indignation. During the few weeks Larmer had been in Poplar he had endeared himself to all with whom he came in contact, and the men, a little shy at first, had begun to awaken to the fact that their new master really intended to befriend them. This conviction only tended to deepen the horror of the event. On all sides the opinion was freely expressed that Dredger was at the bottom of the affair, if not actually the murderer himself.

Merivale, when he sufficiently recovered himself, sent a telegram to Sir Hugo Romaine, as representing the nearest kin he knew Larmer to possess. The old soldier, inexpressibly shocked, unable to credit the brief message contained in the telegram, arrived at the works before noon.

## The Next Morning

Merivale, on the outlook for him, received him at the gate.

'I gather from the early placards what has happened,' he said, as he bade Merivale a brief good-morning. 'It is inexplicable, incredible. Can you explain anything?'

The old soldier looked haggard and upset. Merivale felt sorry for him as he led him into the porter's lodge.

'It is unfortunately quite easy to account for the affair,' he said sadly. 'We have no doubt that it can be traced to a man of the name of Dredger, a former employé, a dissolute ruffian whom Mr. Larmer reinstated about a week ago.'

Sir Hugo nodded, fully understanding.

'In keeping with his queer new ideas about making brothers of them all. He dined with us last night; probably you were not aware of the fact.'

'Yes, sir, I was here very late last night. In fact, I saw Mr. Larmer alive and in excellent spirits shortly before midnight. I helped him to carry some things to his new room; it had just been prepared for him next door to the counting-house. When I left him, I felt that it was a strange arrangement—one for which I should personally not care at all, it was too isolated.'

'What was the idea?' asked the old man, with difficulty.

## The Fighting Line

Merivale shrugged his shoulders.

'To be at the heart of things. That was how he expressed it. We talked the matter over just before we parted, and I ventured to express the opinion that it would be better for himself, and possibly for all his interests, were he to live in London and come down here every day.'

'Precisely what I told him last night, and my daughter urged him to spend the rest of the month with us in Cromwell Road. He declined, but he was in splendid spirits.'

'He seemed so last night, though he talked of having made a will. I did not like it, Sir Hugo; in fact, it disturbed my sleep.'

'Setting his house in order! I believe we get presentiments of evil, but I must repeat that he seemed in the best of spirits. Where is he? Have they taken him to the mortuary, to go through the usual ghastly formalities?'

'Not yet, Sir Hugo. Will you come this way? I have the key in my pocket, the other is in the possession of the police. We have duplicate keys to all the private places. I had been in the habit of keeping the keys myself, and when Mr. Larmer came home, he insisted that we should share alike.'

'He thought very highly of you, Mr. Merivale. In fact, a large part of his conversation last night consisted in eulogy of you.'

Merivale put up a deprecating hand.

## The Next Morning

'He has been very good to me, sir, since his return, and I personally feel that I shall never recover from the shock of this foul crime.'

He stood aside to let the old soldier pass out, and they walked slowly together towards the office door. A constable stood on guard there; he touched his hat respectfully, and stood aside while Merivale fitted the key in the lock. When they entered, he closed it again, and took off his cap.

Merivale, with his own hands, had converted Larmer's sleeping-place into a sort of chapel, and he lay on his bed covered with a white sheet, just between the two windows. Merivale's eyes were wet as he folded back the sheet. The face was perfectly peaceful, and the expression most beautiful. All the lines had smoothed away, and a boyishness had crept back to the features. Sir Hugo remembered him in the old Eton days when he had come to spend an occasional holiday with them at Ruthlin. His shoulders heaved, and he dashed something from his eye.

'It was a dastardly end for a chap like him. His father was a brave man, and his mother one of the sweetest women I have ever known. Cover him up. Poor Percy! Inscrutable are the ways of Providence. Now, what could be the meaning of permitting such a crime? He was very in-offensive, and trying to do his duty by those who did not appreciate him.'

## The Fighting Line

'They did, sir. There is general mourning among the men, and if the perpetrator of the deed could be found, short work would be made of him—in fact, some of them are on his track now, and if they find him, I promise you the police won't have a chance.'

'Indeed! Then they have their suspicions?'

'Yes.'

Sir Hugo turned towards the door.

'Poor chap, cut off in his prime. Five-and-thirty. He was joking about it last night, and my daughter was laughing at his grey hairs. They were very good friends. Well, I will go; I can do nothing here. If you want me at any time, Mr. Merivale, you will find me at your service.'

'Thank you, Sir Hugo.'

'If he really set his house in order, as he spoke of doing, there will probably be few complications. Did he happen to mention the name of any lawyer to you?'

'No, he merely spoke of having paid a visit to Furnival's Inn.'

'Furnival's Inn! Ah, I have the man. I'll call there on my way back. Good-bye, Mr. Merivale, you have my warm sympathy, and I repeat, I shall always be glad to see you in the Cromwell Road.'

The old soldier's cordial manner comforted

## The Next Morning

Merivale; he thanked him for it as he opened the gate.

The usual gaping crowd, drawn by morbid curiosity to the scene of crime, were clustered on the pavement outside.

Sir Hugo made a gesture of disgust, and quickly made his way through it. After a moment's hesitation, Merivale followed him, locking the gate after him. He felt weak and faint, and suddenly recollected that he had eaten nothing since the glass of milk before six o'clock in the morning. It was now noon. He proceeded towards the River House, followed by the gaze of the curious crowd.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### THE LAST SLEEP

SIR HUGO reached his house a little late for luncheon, having been detained longer than he had expected at Furnival's Inn. His face wore a curious expression as he let himself in and made his way at once to the dining-room. He guessed he should find his wife and daughter there already, it being one of the laws of the household that meals should not be delayed for late comers.

Lady Elizabeth looked up quickly. She was rather subdued by the shocking event, the particulars of which she had already perused in the earliest editions of the evening papers.

'Well,' she said briefly, 'what did you find?'

Janet was pale, and her eyes looked pathetically sad as she waited her father's reply.

'I found just what I expected,' he said, as he drew in his chair. 'The poor chap was done to death last night, a most sordid affair, my dear; an ordinary burglar, the safe was rifled. There is no doubt poor Percy met his death trying to defend himself.'

## The Last Sleep

'It's what comes of doing abnormal things. If poor Percy had been content to behave like a rational being, it would not have happened. Did any one ever hear of such folly as to sleep in a great lonely place like that, with money and valuables about, and in such a neighbourhood? Why, it was courting disaster, and simply playing up to these terrible people down there.'

'It was not so very lonely. There was a night-watchman, the porter and his wife at the lodge gate, and a dog. It seems to me that some things require a good deal of clearing up.'

'Oh, no doubt there was a gang of them,' said Lady Elizabeth, with her usual sweeping assertion. 'Did you see the man who was Percy's manager?'

'Merivale? Oh, yes. He feels very badly about it, I could see.'

'I suppose no suspicion attaches itself to him? He knew Percy's habits better than any one.'

'Oh, mother!' said Janet, with a quick wounded note in her voice. 'Do be careful what you say!'

Sir Hugo faintly smiled.

'Your mother does not mean anything, my dear,' he said, patting Janet's hand. 'And she has never seen Mr. Merivale.'

'I thought Percy said too much about him last night,' said Lady Elizabeth. 'I don't hold with these abnormal intimacies. Percy was rational in nothing. And, as I pointed out to him, it was

## The Fighting Line

perfectly absurd to talk of making the man a full partner on such short acquaintance.'

'My dear Elizabeth, Merivale has been the practical head of the concern for the last ten years. I should say that in making him a partner, and thus securing his services and interest for all time, Percy showed a judgment he may have lacked in other things; in fact, it is the only feature that redeems this deplorable affair—his trust in Merivale, I mean.'

'But there is really no absolute trust to be placed in that class,' said Lady Elizabeth severely. 'They break out in all sorts of unexpected places. Well, it is a good thing the deed was not executed, as things have happened. I suppose now the concern will be sold to the highest bidder. Are we his next-of-kin?'

Sir Hugo nodded. He could impart a piece of disagreeable news to his wife, but hesitated. He had not, indeed, got sufficiently accustomed to the idea himself to speak of it with the calmness necessary. And he was quite well aware in what spirit his wife would receive it.

'Would there be much money, Hugo?' she inquired, with consuming interest.

'Yes. I learned incidentally from Merivale that Percy had been consulting a lawyer in town within the last few days. Merivale did not know his name, but Percy had mentioned Furnival's Inn;

## The Last Sleep

of course it was St. Leger. I went there on my way home.'

'And did you learn anything?' asked Lady Elizabeth, leaning her elbows on the table, and stretching eagerly forward.

'Yes, he had made his will, set his house in order, as he called it, and Merivale is practically his sole executor and legatee.'

'Ah!' Lady Elizabeth gave a sharp exclamation, and fell back in her chair. 'I told you so. There are wheels within wheels. This Merivale is a deep schemer, an unprincipled person who played on Percy's feelings. I hope the police will be sharper than they usually are in their investigations, and that all these points will be taken into consideration. Poor Percy was not fit to manage his own affairs. His whole line of conduct goes to prove it, and this Merivale has profited by it, and quite evidently used all his influence to further his own end.'

Janet rose from the table, a red spot of indignation burning on her cheek.

'Mother, I can't sit here and listen to you. Father, make her stop, she has no right to say such things, to bring such wicked accusations against a man she knows nothing about. You have seen him, and know how base and unworthy such accusations are, how utterly impossible as applied to him.'

'Yes, yes, my dear,' responded the old soldier

## The Fighting Line

soothingly. 'Nobody takes your mother seriously, she is always talking.'

Lady Elizabeth gave a shrill laugh. Never had her husband made such an unflattering remark.

'A nice sort of speech to make, Hugo. I shall have both you and Janet congratulating this Merivale person next on our misfortune. We are Percy's nearest kindred, and if this strange story turns out to be true, it will be our duty and our interest to make some protest, to try and set aside this will.'

Sir Hugo shrugged his shoulders.

'It is a very elaborate document, my dear, and I fancy Merivale will not get much in the long run. He has been left rather as an almoner and distributor of Percy's wealth. Most of it will remain in the East End, to be used for the use of the very class that repaid him so ill. There is a legacy to Janet; I did not, and could not ask the amount, and at this moment I care nothing about it. The whole affair is horrible and most depressing. Poor, poor boy! he was so bright last night. I tell you it has bowled me over; I wish I had been a bit more sympathetic to him about his quixotic schemes.'

Lady Elizabeth observed that her husband was deeply moved. Chagrined and annoyed as she was, she decided that she had better say no more.

'I shall drive to Furnival's Inn myself this afternoon, and find out from St. Leger the actual state



'THERE, THERE, LITTLE WOMAN, NEVER MIND. YOUR MOTHER  
DOESN'T MEAN HALF SHE SAYS.'



## The Last Sleep

of affairs,' she remarked, as she sailed out of the room.

When the door closed, Janet approached her father's chair and put her arms round his neck. Her wet eyes brushed his cheek.

'There, there, little woman, never mind, your mother doesn't mean half she says; it's a good thing she doesn't. Yes, it's a terrible business. I can't get the poor lad out of my head.'

'Father, may I go down? I do want to see him again before they take him away,' whispered Janet. 'We had a long talk last night, I shall never forget it.'

'I don't think it would be wise for you to go, your mother wouldn't like it. We mustn't vex or aggrav. her more than we can help. She's upset about the money, but what can it matter? We've never counted on it, and Percy had a perfect right to will it as he pleased. Personally, I am glad for Merivale's sake. He's an honest man, and a most likeable fellow. Your mother has never seen him; if she had, she could not have made such a monstrous suggestion about him.'

'No, no, that doesn't worry me; but may I go down, father? I shall never rest until I do.'

'Well, I can refuse you nothing, and I suppose at the Settlement you got accustomed to strange things. But say nothing to your mother, she is very much upset already.'

## The Fighting Line

'She will certainly go to Furnival's Inn. Percy told me last night he had been fixing up his affairs, and he gave me the outline of a scheme he had for the regeneration of the East End. His idea was to make the business as prosperous as possible, and devote the whole of the proceeds to that object. He also told me he had decided to make Merivale his full partner, so that he might be justly treated and repaid for his share in making the business what it is. He had a very just mind, father. Oh, poor, poor Percy! I can't believe he is really dead.'

'He told you all this, did he? Well, I'm glad you at least have some understanding of what was in his mind. Would you like me to take you down to Poplar? I'm not particularly anxious to go, I've had enough of the place. But if you are at all nervous about going, I will come.'

'I am not at all nervous. I will come and go quickly,' she assured him.

'You'll be all right with Merivale. Be kind to him, Janet. The mere thought of having such an accusation made against him, thoughtlessly even, makes me tingle with shame. He's a fine fellow, I assure you. You would think so if you had seen and heard him to-day.'

'I have always thought so, father,' she answered, as she went out of the room.

The tone of her voice awakened a wonder in the old soldier's mind, and he gave a little start. But

## The Last Sleep

he put the suspicion from him quickly, as too absurd and impossible to be entertained for a moment.

Janet donned her nurse's garb, feeling by some intuition that it was the most fitting, and made haste by the Underground to the East End, arriving at Poplar Station at half-past two. She hesitated there a moment, standing outside the station, where all the newsboys were yelling the same, the posters ablaze with it, and little knots of people standing about discussing it. She was at a loss where to go first ; she had just decided on the River House, when suddenly she saw Merivale on the other side of the street talking with a policeman. She made a dart forward, and he saw her when she was in the middle of the street. Instantly he left the man with whom he was talking, and came to meet her.

' I expected you,' he said quietly. ' And I have not been far away all day.' He took her by the arm, and piloted her back to the pavement, and they turned their faces eastwards. ' You would like to go to the works ? ' he said quietly.

' Yes, and father hoped you would be here to take me.'

Merivale inclined his head. His manner and looks were subdued ; he looked like one who has received a crushing blow.

' A terrible thing, is it not ? ' she said, with a

## The Fighting Line

little shudder. 'It seems to come home to one here. Have you discovered anything?'

He shook his head. 'There is really nothing to discover. We have no doubt that the perpetrator was a man named Dredger, to whom much kindness and forbearance have been shown. Mr. Larmer insisted on reinstating him at the works about ten days ago. He has disappeared; he is the man for whom the police are looking now.'

'Is Mr. Freeman at home?' asked Janet.

'No. In Paris to-day, and Zurich to-morrow; he cannot be back before Saturday.'

'Then you are quite alone?'

'Except for Adelaide, yes.'

They turned off the main road into the quieter, more gloomy by-street which led in a straight line to Larmer's gates. Janet took a side glance at Merivale's face, and wondered how much he knew regarding the disposition of Larmer's affairs. He, unaware of her thoughts, fancied she was dreading the coming ordeal. He half stopped, regarding her with great tenderness.

'Are you sure you should go? There is nothing to shock or alarm you, but still it upset Sir Hugo Romaine very much. It is the scene of the actual crime; but he might be asleep in the chapel, there is nothing to remind you.'

'I will go,' she said steadily. 'I told father I wished to see him before they took him away.'

## The Last Sleep

'Which will be to-morrow morning. May I say how glad I am to see you in this garb again?' He touched the folds of the long grey cloak in which he had seen her first.

'I felt it was the right thing, and Percy said last night, he hoped and felt certain I should come back to Poplar.'

He did not reply, for they had come to the gates, and passed within. The crowd had slackened a little, being fed by the sight of blank walls and closed gates; only a few stragglers watched them go in.

They did not hesitate, but walked straight to the little mortuary room. Janet's tears fell as they passed within. Only a few hours before the dead man had been describing his new quarters, and inviting her down to see what he called the 'Hermit's Cell.' When she entered, Merivale drew back, and stood with his head bared in the outside passage. She went quickly forward and fell upon her knees. He could hear the sob which broke from her lips as her head bent in prayer. When she rose, he stepped into the room, and took the Bible from the mantelpiece.

'This was open on the table,' he explained. 'I kept the place, so that you would see it.'

She nodded, and her eyes fell upon the page.

'In my Father's house are many mansions,' she said gently. 'He has inherited his to-day, and his joy is written on his face.'

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### LOVE THE LEVELLER

A DELAIDE was sitting on the bench at the door puzzling over a letter that had come for her by the morning's post. Merivale saw the pink of her cotton frock against the green through the gaps in the ragged hedge as he came along the paths from the works.

It was August now, the month nearing its end, but it was still very hot in the Isle of Dogs. Scarcely a breath of air stirred ; the sun shone high in the hard, blue sky ; the green of the ragged edge and the beaten turf of the little garden were sadly unrefreshed. The glory of the summer had departed there, though in country places it could still be found. The water-famine was spreading down East after the long drought, and there was none to spare for purposes outside the domestic world.

Merivale had been amusing himself in his spare hours making a contrivance to haul up water in buckets from the river to refresh the garden, but as yet he had not come to a satisfactory conclusion. He was conscious of great weariness as he opened

## Love the Leveller

the wicket, of a desire to get away from the leaden air, the stifling heat of these crowded latitudes, where there was no room to breathe.

Adelaide jumped up at the creaking of the gate, and ran in to her momentarily neglected duties. It was the breakfast hour, and the table was spread in the cool little sitting-room, where the sun seldom penetrated. All the comfort of a well-ordered household was enjoyed by the inmates of the River House, and they took it all, perhaps, as a natural thing.

'Please, sir, I've 'ad a letter from Miss Romaine, but I can't quite mike it out. It's writ large, but I ain't no scholard,' said Adelaide, as she brought the tray.

'Let me see it,' said Merivale; and Adelaide took it from her pocket and laid it down. 'Written from Wrest Park. Shall I read it aloud, Adelaide?'

'Hif yer please, sir.'

'WREST PARK, *Wednesday*.

'DEAR ADELAIDE,—I hope you are quite well. I am writing to say I am here with my uncle, Mr. Franklin Agar, and that my cousin Gerald is to have a birthday on Saturday. Mr. Merivale knows about this, and will explain to you what I want. It is that you will come down with him and Mr. Freeman as early as possible on Saturday so as to be in time for all the fun. They will let

## The Fighting Line

us know what time to expect them, and a carriage will be at the station. But I thought you would like a proper invitation, and a letter all to yourself. Manny returns from the Continent to-morrow. He writes in great spirits—how happy he will be to see his dear Adelaide again! He speaks of her in every letter. I hope you are getting on with your spelling, and that Mr. Merivale is a hard task-master about the copy-book. Believe me,

‘Your sincere friend,

‘JANET ROMAINE.’

Adelaide’s face was a study as she listened to the recital of these words.

‘Oh, ain’t she good? She don’t furgit nobody, nor nothin’. Do you think I might go, Mister Merivale?’

‘Why, certainly, Adelaide, you shall go. We leave Waterloo on Saturday at two o’clock.’

‘Oh, sir, that’ll be like ’Eaven to see Manny again, an’ dear Miss Romaine, an’ the country, the sea—my! I wus at Margit onst, at the school treat wiv Mrs. Mac.’

‘Mrs. Mac is going down too, Adelaide, and Mr. Mac. It will be quite a gathering of the clans.’

Adelaide suddenly remembered a forgotten message.

‘A letter, sir, came along of mine; it’s got a

## Love the Leveller

furrin postmark on it, an' I thought it might be from Manny 'isself.'

She ran to fetch it, and Merivale took it with a curious feeling of expectancy. It was no surprise to him to behold the United States stamp and the sprawling writing of his sister Polly.

'Thank you, Adelaide.'

She went out and closed the door, and Merivale, after a momentary hesitation, broke the envelope open. He could see the letter was rather long, but it did not take many seconds for him to master the contents.

'289, WEST 23RD STREET,

'NEW YORK CITY,

'August 18th.

'DEAR GEORGE,—You will be surprised to hear from me, but something makes me write. I have left Glazebrook. Everything happened just as you said it would. He is a bad man, and I am sorry for his poor wife, for she is bound to him, and I am not. He began to treat me badly soon after we landed. He is lazy, and thought I would work to keep him. But this is not good enough for Polly Merivale; I stood up to him straight once or twice, and he knows what I think of him. He has gone back to London—there's no room anywhere else for his sort. If you should happen to see him down Poplar way, don't let your eyes

## The Fighting Line

light on him ; he isn't worth it, and it was my fault. Don't you worry about me, George. I write in case you would worry, or stand up to Ted if you happened to see him. What I tell you is true, it will save you asking questions. I've been taking daily work—cooking, since I left Ted. It pays very well, but I don't like living in lodgings. It's dreary in a big, strange city, and the heat is cruel. To-morrow I'm going to the Catskill Mountains with a lady I got to know at the mission close by. She has a country cottage there, and I will do the chores. She pays me well, fifteen dollars a month. I will work my way back to respectability, and you needn't worry about me, George, I will never sink any lower. I've been a fool once, it's enough for a woman like me. I often think of you and the dear little house, and Charlie Freeman and Manny, and the Macs and Miss Romaine. Give them all my love, and tell Miss Romaine especially, I've never forgotten what she said that day she came to me when I was washing in the scullery. Every word she spoke followed me across the sea, and I think of it now. She was right all the time, and every time, and I've paid the price.

' Maybe I'll write to you when I get to the mountains ; it's cruel hot here, I'm dead tired. If you want me to write again you can send me a line here, and my landlady (tell Mrs. Mac she's

## Love the Leveller

a Scotchwoman (from her own Glasgow) will send it to me. If I don't hear I won't write, and I'll know you've finished with me, but I'll always remember you, dear Geo.

'From your loving sister,  
'POLLY.'

Merivale laid down the letter and drank his coffee absently. A kind of peace crept about his soul, for this was a far better letter than he had dared to expect. Polly had paid the price indeed, but his knowledge of her assured him that she spoke the truth in every line, and he hoped that presently would come true repentance for her sin. His thought, as he finished his breakfast, and walked back to the works, was that the ravelled threads of life were being strangely smoothed out. His whole position and prospects had been altered by Larmer's death, and the terms of the will he had made almost at the last moment. Merivale was now the absolute head of the great concern that George Larmer had built up, but outwardly, at least, he had made no difference in his way of life, nor had he made any declaration to the men, though some of them had obtained information concerning the will from the newspapers.

It was a commentary on his life and walk among them, that not one grudged him his good fortune,

## The Fighting Line

or would have had the condition of things altered. He had been their real master for years, and never had any body of workmen had a better.

No trace of Larmer's murderer had been found ; it was one of the mysteries which baffle the police and have to be left in oblivion.

Freeman was still living at the River House, and pursuing his vocation, though Merivale imagined in him, of late, some half-heartedness. Also he was aware that many letters had passed between him and Franklin Agar. He believed privately that a crisis in Freeman's life was approaching. It was all vague and indefinite, however, and they had not talked about it at all. He was eager, however, to show Freeman Polly's letter ; it was a subject they could discuss as brothers.

It rained all Friday night, and Adelaide was afraid lest the glory of her summer array should be spoiled on Saturday. But the sun shone when she rose before five o'clock, and the clean, fine rain had washed the grime from the world, and made it new and sweet again. Adelaide had hard work to keep her singing still as she slipped about, cleaning with all her might.

There never was such a dainty habitation as the little house by the river's brim, nor a happier chatelaine. Save for the separation from Manny, which she only endured because she knew it

## Love the Leveller

was for his good, Adelaide had not a wish unfulfilled.

At two o'clock at Waterloo the happy party met Mr. and Mrs. Macbride, she looking rosy and plump after a long visit in Scotland, and there was a great deal of merry talk in the compartment they secured for themselves. It was a fast train which brought them to Wrest station in an hour and a half. It stopped there by special permission to let down the Park guests, of whom there was a goodly number. Carriages were in waiting at the beautiful wayside station, and when Adelaide found herself on the box of one, being driven through lovely lanes, almost continuously in sight of the sea, she was speechless. Her excitement continued to rise as they drew nearer their destination; it was the thought of seeing Manny that unnerved her. She had heard something, though not much, of what they had been doing for him; she expected to find him much better, and knew that he had been able to sit up for quite a while before he left the health resort abroad to which the Austrian surgeon had sent him.

They passed through great iron gates, with stone lions carved on the pillars that supported them, flags flying everywhere, and then between two long lines of wonderful and stately beeches, through which the sunbeams filtered in delicious little shafts of gold. It had rained there, too, in

## The Fighting Line

the night, and the turf was a thing to wonder at. The graceful deer roamed about fearlessly under the trees, and lifted their beautiful soft eyes in wonder as the carriages rolled by. Adelaide did not know what they were, but forbore to ask, lest her ignorance should offend the gorgeous and stately personage who drove the fast horses with that careless air which indicated long familiarity with an exalted position.

Presently a sudden bend in the trees brought the long, low house in sight, standing like a gem at the edge of beautiful green lawns, which were gay with people in summer attire.

A figure in white ran forward, waving a pink sunshade, and Adelaide breathed freely when she recognised her dear Miss Romaine.

'Ah! there you are. Do you know I am more pleased to see you here than anybody, almost, Adelaide? And dear Mrs. Mac, too. How are you all?' Her voice was very joyous, but had a little break in it, partly of excitement, partly of emotion. 'How do you do, Mr. Freeman? Manny is dying to see you. Mr. Merivale, my uncle Agar is just over here under the trees, and Gerald is at the back of the house. He is not at all well to-day, and has not been able to get up to greet all the guests. Come, Mr. Freeman and Adelaide, and I will take you to Manny. Uncle Franklin said I might.'

## Love the Leveller

Merivale saw that she was labouring under intense excitement, the cause of which he could partly guess. She was looking lovely, and his heart beat with a hungry longing, as his eyes devoured her face. Sometimes of late, since the wonderful change had come into his life, he had dreamed his dreams, but here she seemed a creature so apart, the gulf seemed so wide, he dared not hope. She passed very close to him at the moment, and looked up into his face.

‘I must tell you, Mr. Merivale; it has come true, what we hoped and prayed for. Do you understand?’

He smiled and nodded, and they passed on, Freeman walking by her side, a little awkwardly yet in haste to see his boy. They went through a little path under bending rose-boughs, and so to one of the lawns behind the house. And when they came there, Adelaide stood still, and gave a shrill cry. A bath-chair stood under the trees with a recumbent figure upon it—Gerald Agar, to whose inspiration they owed this happy day. But it was not at him they looked; by his side was the tall, slim figure of a lad, with a pale, sweet face, and a mass of curly hair, standing straight and firm on his legs, wearing a grey summer suit and red tie, to match his father’s. Manny, come to himself, able to take his own place in the world of men! He turned at Adelaide’s cry, and ran—

## The Fighting Line

yes, ran across the turf, and bounded into his father's arms.

'It's all right, dad—quite, quite right. See, I can walk and run; it's like heaven.'

Adelaide burst into tears.

Freeman went very white, and looked round a little bewildered, then Janet and Adelaide fell a little away. He strode across the soft sward to the side of the couch where Gerald Agar lay, with the seal of death on his face, but the peace of heaven in his eyes.

'Come,' said Janet softly. They saw him kneel down as they made haste away, and heard the sound of a bursting sob that came from his overcharged heart. And Janet said in her heart, as she touched Adelaide's arm, that it was holy ground.

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Adelaide was ready for their return. Twenty times she had gone out to look whether they were in sight. She had been at home all Sunday alone, and this was Monday evening; they had promised that they would come home then, and her excitement knew no bounds. Presently, as she still watched and waited, a little heart-sick with hope deferred, she heard the gate. She ran down, only to see Freeman enter alone.

## Love the Leveller

'Where are they—Mr. Merivale and Manny?' she asked blankly.

'Mr. Merivale has gone somewhere else to-day, Adelaide, to Ruthlin, with Miss Romaine, and they are bringing Manny back to-morrow.'

'Why didn't you stop, too?' she asked, with a sudden snap in her voice. Her disappointment was so great that she could have cried.

'Because I promised you I should be home. Aren't you glad to see me?'

'Yus, of course I ham; but it ain't like the 'ole lot, an' I've got a lovely bit of 'am ready.'

'By-and-by. Come and sit down here, Adelaide, on the seat and let's talk about things. I'm out of it, old girl; Manny doesn't need me any longer.'

'Stuff an' nonsense,' she said indignantly, twisting her apron as she followed him to the old painted seat, but she did not sit down.

'Manny's on his own now, Adelaide. They've arranged it all; he's going into his Uncle George's office part of the day, and to get lessons the other part. A miracle, isn't it?'

'No, it's the Lord's doin'.' Then suddenly she sang out as if her heart were bursting—

'I will sing of my Redeemer,  
And His wondrous love for me.

'I can't 'elp it. It's wonderful 'ow evvry-think's arranged so 'eavenly. We couldn' a-done

## The Fighting Line

it never. 'Ow's the other one ter-day?' 'Appy 'e oughter be fer all 'e's done. My! ain't Manny a nipper? Nivver see a beauty like 'im. Hi'm us proud of 'im as hif 'e'd bin me own, yer wouldn't believe.'

'Don't I know it?' said Freeman, with a curious soft note in his voice. 'Mr. Gerald is very poorly. He won't live long, Adelaide.'

'Won't 'e? Hit seems a shime, but there's the many mansions. 'E'll 'ave the very best, sir, that we hall knows.'

Freeman nodded.

'I've got something to tell you about Mr. Merivale; we've lost him, if you like. He's going to marry Miss Romaine.'

'Is 'e? Oh, my! Hit's as good as any story-book. But hi ain't surprised.'

'I suppose not. Is there anything you don't see, Adelaide, with those big eyes of yours?'

She smiled and shook her head, still humming the refrain of the joyous hymn, which best expressed her state of mind.

'Yes, they're going to marry, Adelaide, rather soon, I expect. And they're going to live here.' Here Adelaide's face fell.

'Our dear little 'ome. Then we've got to git.'

'Naturally you and I and Manny. You won't let them persuade you to leave us in the lurch? You really belong to us, you know.'

## Love the Leveller

'I do,' said Adelaide solemnly. 'I likes 'em very much, but as yer says, I b'long ter you.'

'You mean that, Adelaide?'

She looked at him suddenly, and something in his eyes awakened her heart; her colour rose, and she turned aside.

'I guess I'll go indoors,' she said hurriedly. 'I don' know mesself, wiv so many queer things 'appenin'. I'm a bit hupset.'

'Just a moment, Adelaide. You belong to us, my dear, and there is only one way to make sure we don't have to share you with some one else. You've made all the home the boy and I have known these last five years. It's our turn now; let me try to make a home for you.'

'Wot is it—wot is it yer s'yin', Mister Freeman? You're a gittin' at me,' said Adelaide in a whisper.

'No, my dear; I've no right, perhaps, for I'm getting an old man, and you might do better for yourself. But I want you, Adelaide, you're my home.'

'Hit's marryin' yer mean, Mister Freeman, marryin' fair an' square?' she said, with a strange wistfulness in her eyes.

'Why, sure, my dear wife; Adelaide; and, God help me, I'll try and make up to you for all you've done for us. Manny knows all about it; it will make him as happy as it will make me.'

## The Fighting Line

She bent her modest head on her breast, and in  
her eyes wonder grew.

'Yer wife, me! Hadelaide, wot wus foun' on  
the doorstep. Lor', wot will Skimmins s'y?'

So did Love the leveller spread his beneficent  
wings above the Isle of Dogs.

THE END

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